



Roses
in the DARK

SOPHIE STERN

Table of Contents

- Chapter 1
- Chapter 2
- Chapter 3
- Chapter 4
- Chapter 5
- Chapter 6
- Chapter 7
- Chapter 8
- Chapter 9
- Chapter 10
- Chapter 11
- Chapter 12
- Epilogue
- Chapter 1
- Chapter 2
- Prologue

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Sophie Stern

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Contents

[Roses in the Dark](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Alien Dragon](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[The Saucy Devil](#)

[Prologue](#)

[1](#)

**For all of my readers
May you find light in the darkness**

Chapter 1

It's not every day you meet a monster.

For most people, monsters are something out of fairytale storybooks. They're things of legends, things they've only ever heard about. For most people, the idea of monsters is horrifying and a little unnerving. After all, no one wants to admit the thing they're most afraid of is real. No one wants to admit the stories could be true.

My father warns me that Farwol is this sort of monster. He warns me that the best thing I can do is to stay hidden, to lock myself in my bedroom and not come out. He says that when Farwol comes to collect his debts, I need to be as far from the creature as possible.

He says this is the only way to survive.

I don't remember when my father got entangled with the beast from the forest. Everyone in the village fears the reclusive billionaire who comes only to collect his debts. It's only when the three moons align together and shine bright that Farwol will come. It's on these nights the villagers who are indebted to him must pay what they owe or face a fate worse than death.

It's on these nights when the creature comes to call that the villagers grow terrified.

Tonight, my father is one of them.

He begins to panic around lunchtime. The sun is still bright in the sky, but he's trying to collect enough money to pay back the man he borrowed from. Why my father owes Farwol, I don't know. Why my father would turn to seeking money from a monster, I don't understand. The only thing I know is that when the sun sets, he'll come to our door, and my father must be ready to pay.

"I can help you," I say, watching him run around. He's grabbing different items of value to try to go sell. He's grabbing the candlesticks, the paintings, the silverware. He's grabbing anything he thinks might fetch a price, but fear fills my heart because I don't think it will be enough.

Whatever debt my father owes Farwol, it's one that will not be repaid with simple silverware. No, this debt goes much deeper and is far greater than I can imagine.

"Eve, you must stay here," Father says. He grabs a few more items and throws them into a large bag before heading out of the house. "And no matter who comes to the door, you don't answer it. Understand? Do not answer the door, Eve. Not even for your friends."

I stand at the door and nod, not quite understanding the seriousness of the situation. My father is completely panicking and I wish I could help him. I wish there was something I could do. I should be able to do something, to ease his suffering, but he won't tell me what he's done, what he owes.

He won't tell me why he went to the monster in the first place.

Father closes the door and waits just outside while I lock it. Once satisfied, I hear him descend the rest of the steps and leave with Pepper, our horse. Then I am truly alone.

I sit in a chair and stare at the wall, wondering how the world has come to this. Am I such a failure as a daughter that I cannot figure out a way to save my own papa? Am I such a terrible human that I cannot come up with a single solution to this predicament? I should be better.

I should be able to find a way.

Yet I spend the entire afternoon and into the evening trying to come up with ideas to make the money my father desperately needs and I come up short. I come up with nothing. Soon the moons rise and father still isn't back. I pace back and forth in the living room for what feels like hours. Eventually, the sound of hoofs arrives outside the door and father comes into the house.

"Did you get the money?" I ask anxiously, hopefully, but he shakes his head. "Oh, Papa," I

whisper, going to him. I hug my father, wrapping my arms around him. “What’s going to happen now?” I ask.

“We’ll figure something out,” he says, only this time, he doesn’t sound as hopeful as he did before. The paintings and the silverware are gone. Father is carrying a thin velvet bag that jingles as he moves.

“How much gold did you get?” I ask, nodding toward the bag.

He shakes his head. “Silver,” is all he says, and he sets it down on the wooden table in the center of the room. We sit to a supper of warm stew and stale bread, but eat in silence. We’re both so completely wrapped up in our own thoughts that we don’t hear the horses approaching the house until the riders are coming up to the door.

“Eve!” My father says my name in a hushed whisper. “Quick! To your room!”

“Papa,” I protest lightly, but I know it’s no use. They’ve come for him and there’s no stopping whatever happens now. He motions for me to go hide, so I go into the adjacent bedroom and close the door. Then I crawl under the bed.

Papa showed me long ago where he wanted me to hide if anything bad happened. This isn’t a particularly good hiding place. I think if someone wants to find me, it won’t be difficult, but it’s the only place I have.

The area beneath the bed is dusty. I should have kept this area clean, I realize, but it’s too late for that now. My dress will be dirty and soiled when I come out, but that doesn’t matter.

All that matters is my father.

I hear him open the door.

“Gentlemen,” he says politely. “What can I do for you?”

Even with the bedroom door closed, it’s not difficult to hear what they’re saying. The hardwood floors make every sound echo, make every footstep exaggerated.

“You know why we’re here,” a deep voice says.

“I don’t have your m-m-money,” my father starts to stutter, and suddenly, the room seems so much colder.

He’s scared.

Papa is scared.

My father is never scared, never afraid. Nothing makes him worry. Nothing upsets him. He certainly never becomes unnerved to the point of stuttering, but that’s happening now.

“That’s unfortunate,” the voice says. “I suppose I’ll have to take my payment in other ways.” I listen carefully. There are at least three men, I think. The one talking must be Farwol. He said *my* money: not *our* money. That makes me think he’s the one in charge, the one leading this group of thugs.

That’s what they are, I think with an angry frown. They’re thugs. They’re bandits. They’re worthless pieces of shit who have no business coming in here.

And I won’t let them touch my father.

I should go out there and reason with them. Maybe if I explain everything, they’ll be understanding. Maybe they’ll leave us alone.

Only, before I can move to wiggle out of my spot, I hear footsteps approaching the door, and I pause.

“Anything,” my father says. “I’ll give you anything you want.”

Farwol pauses for a moment. His men say something I can’t quite hear. Maybe he’ll be reasonable. Maybe he’ll be normal. Maybe he won’t be the monster everyone says he is. Maybe he won’t be the beast.

But then Farwol says, “I’m terribly sorry about interrupting your supper.” My heart starts to race as I realize what he’s going to say next. “Who was your dining companion? Surely an impoverished man, such as yourself, wouldn’t eat two bowls of stew on your own.”

“I...I...”

“Find her,” Farwol commands, and I hear his men burst into my father’s bedroom. This is it. I’m next. They’re going to find me and take me to him. I scoot back further under the bed. All thoughts of being brave flee as I wonder what’s going to happen to me.

Maybe they won’t look under here.

Maybe they won’t see me.

Maybe...

But then the door to my room opens and they walk inside. I see two pairs of muddy boots enter and move to the center of the bedroom.

“She’s not ‘ere,” one of the men says.

They didn’t look under the bed.

I’m safe.

They didn’t find me.

I breathe a sigh of relief, but when I do, my breath kicks up a little flutter of dust from the bedroom floor and before I can stop myself, I let out the loudest sneeze of my life.

“Never mind!” The man says, reaching under the bed. “Found her.”

Chapter 2

I wiggle and thrash my body around as the man pulls me from beneath the bed, but he's much stronger than I am.

"Feisty little thing," the man says. He hauls me to my feet and whirls me around, pinning my arms between my back and his chest. I'm stuck now. He wraps a thick, muscular arm over my stomach, yanking me tightly against him. "Don't move, sweetheart," he says. "You wouldn't want to get hurt."

"Fuck you," I spit.

"And she's ill-mannered," the second man says. The two men guide me roughly out of my bedroom and in the main room where my father is standing beside the biggest, tallest, handsomest man I have ever seen in my life.

It must be Forwal.

It has to be.

He's taller than I expected; his head almost reaches the ceiling. His shoulders are broad and he's wearing a snug-fitting shirt that shows off his muscles. The shirt is tucked into a pair of pants that are also too tight and I close my eyes before I have a chance to truly finish looking at him.

This is the man who is ruining my father's life.

This is the man who is about to ruin my life.

I can't be attracted to him. That's wrong. It's so, so wrong. I can't be turned on by the way these men are treating me roughly, by the way they're forcing me to do their bidding. In fairytales, the princesses are always innocent and sweet. They're never bad or dirty. They never have unclean thoughts about men. They never have dark desires.

Not like me.

"Please," my father says. "Leave her alone. I'll do anything you want. Anything!"

"I'm afraid that your word is no longer any good," Forwal says. I hear him take a step toward me. "Considering the promises you made me just three months ago. You may promises to pay that you have failed to keep, Alerion."

"I'll do better," my father says. "I just need more time."

"Time is something I will not give you," Forwal moves closer. I can hear him, smell him. I think if I reach out, I'll be able to touch him, but my arms are still pinned behind me. With my eyes squeezed shut, all of my other senses are heightened, and I'm very aware of how my body must look at this moment.

My breasts are pushed outward: an offering, an invitation. My lips are pursed together, but judging by the growing dampness between my legs, I'd guess they look sultry: not angry. My breathing is heavy and rushed, which further pushes my breasts out. They're heaving and heavy. I'm not even wearing a corset. I know Forwal can see all of me, but the thought doesn't humiliate me the way it should.

"What is your name, girl?" He says. The thought of refusing to answer his question doesn't pass through my mind.

"Evelyn," I whisper. "But I'm called Eve."

"Well, *Evelyn*," he says, ignoring my nickname. "You'll be coming with me. Say goodbye to your father now. You won't be seeing him again."

"No!" My father cries out, but the man behind me suddenly releases me and pushes me forward. I open my eyes in time to stop myself from careening into my papa.

“Say goodbye,” Forwal repeats.

“Goodbye, Papa,” I whisper, hugging my father tightly. I plant a chaste kiss on his cheek, which is already wet with tears.

“I’m sorry, Eve,” he says.

“It’s okay, Papa.”

“I’ll find a way to get you back, Eve.”

“I’ll be fine, Papa.”

“That’s enough,” Forwal says. He doesn’t offer to let me gather any of my clothes or belongings. He doesn’t give me anymore time. He simply motions for me to follow him out the front door and somehow, I manage to force myself to move. Somehow, I manage to go with him.

There’s a large carriage outside with a driver sitting out front. Two horses are connected to the carriage. There are another two horses with saddles and baggage. I suppose those are for Forwal’s goons.

“Get in the carriage,” Forwal commands, and once again, I obey him wordlessly. I should turn around and look at my childhood home. I should turn around and try to get one last glimpse of my father. I should turn around and whisper goodbye to the place I was born, the place I was raised, but I don’t. Instead, I climb into the carriage and sit down. Then I place my hands in my lap.

Forwal says something to his men before joining me. I can’t make out the words and I’m not truly listening. My life is going to be different now. My life has changed. Everything is going to be new and strange.

I’m not sure how I’m supposed to feel.

Forwal climbs into the carriage and closes the door. I expect him to sit across from me, but he doesn’t. Instead, he sits directly next to me on the bench. He scoots over until our hips are touching and he places one of his hands on my thigh.

I don’t flinch.

I should flinch.

A proper girl would flinch.

That’s what a good girl would do.

I’m not really a good girl.

The thought floats through my mind quickly before I banish it, along with all my other secret dreams and fantasies. Those are the things I keep locked away, the things no one must ever know about. Those are the things I must hold close to my heart. Those are the secrets I must never share.

Forwal doesn’t speak. Instead, he simply sits with his hand on my thigh, reminding me silently that I am his now. He can do with me as he wishes. If he wants to lock me in a dungeon, he can. If he wants to make me his servant, he can. If he wants to toss me in a bedroom and play with me, he can. He can do his bidding.

There is nothing I can do to stop him.

I should feel sadder. I should feel fear. I should feel so many things that I don’t, and I wonder what could possibly be wrong with me. Most women would be crying, begging for their lives. Most women would be asking their captor not to touch them, not to hurt them, but I’m not doing that.

I’m not begging because I don’t want him to take his hand away.

I don’t want him not to touch me.

The carriage jerks to a start and Farwol keeps his hand in place as we ride into the night. I don’t know where we’re going.

And I don’t know what’s going to happen to me.

Chapter 3

After stopping to collect three more debts, the carriage leaves my village. It's a tiny place: my village. It's always been home to me, but I feel a strange sort of disconnect as we leave. The carriage follows a road out of town and into the forest. I know where we're going now. Even without asking, I know.

Now we're going to Farwol's home.

We're going to his castle.

We're going to his lair.

I look at him as we ride. Each time we stopped to collect someone's debt, Farwol warned me to stay put. Then he went with his two men, who are called Fortune and Gauge, and collected the money owed to him. Each time he returned, he seemed surprised to find me still in place. Of course, he left the carriage driver to watch me, but I think he still thought I would try to run.

The problem is that I have nowhere to go.

Even if I did have somewhere, I don't really want to go.

I sort of just want to stay here.

His body is warm against mine and comfortable. I'm no wilting flower. I know Farwol is as evil as they come, but somehow, I'm not afraid of him. I find his presence calming, almost tranquil. As the ride grows bumpier, Farwol slides his arm around my shoulder.

"Lean your head on me," he says. "It will be more comfortable."

I say nothing, but I obey him instantly. He's right. Leaning on him keeps my head from hitting the back of the carriage. He's soft and he smells nice and the position makes me feel wanted and secure.

"Good girl," Farwol whispers, but then he falls silent again. I wonder what the future holds for me. Will I be his slave or his mistress? Will I be his worker or his wanton? There's no way to tell what a man like him might demand, so I stay silent and try to focus on breathing.

In and out.

In and out.

In and out.

After awhile, I begin to feel tired, and I allow myself to drift off to sleep. When I wake, Farwol is touching my hair, gently playing with the long, dark strands.

"You're awake," he says. "Good. We're almost there." He doesn't stop touching me and he doesn't speak again. I stay perfectly still, trying not to enjoy the sensations pulsating through my body.

He's my captor.

He's not my lover.

He's a bad person: a villain.

I should be scared of Farwol. This knowledge is seared in my mind, yet as his hand moves to my shoulder and begins to massage my skin in soft little circles, I can't seem to care.

A moan escapes my lips and I jump back, embarrassed.

Ashamed.

I scoot to the far edge of the bench and lean against the wall. Farwol doesn't react right away. He doesn't yell. He looks at me for a second and I close my eyes. Now I'm humiliated. A moan? He's the person who has torn me away from my father. I shouldn't react to him in this way, yet somehow, my body betrays me.

Somehow, my body aches for him.

Somehow, my body yearns for him.

And something tells me that Farwol knows exactly how he's affecting me.

"We're here," he says. The carriage stops and he helps me climb down. Once I'm outside, he takes my hand and holds it tightly. I don't resist, but this time, I feel like I should. I should pull away. I glance around at the woods surrounding us. I could run. Now would be the perfect time.

I could run away and go back to my village or I could find a new one. I could find a place of my own, a place to belong. I could find a place to live in solitude and loneliness. I could find a place to build my own world without the restrictions my upbringing placed on me.

Farwol seems to know what I'm thinking, though. "Do not go into the woods," he says. "There are wild animals. If you're attacked, no one will hear you scream."

I shiver and squeeze his hand tightly, seeking comfort. He seems to recognize this and a small smile forms on his face. He likes that. He likes knowing I'm helpless and that I'm forced to depend on him. I don't know if there actually are wild animals or if this is just a story he's telling me to keep me complacent, but the threat is real enough that I'll honor his wishes.

Fortune and Gauge are nowhere to be seen. Farwol and I step away from the carriage and the driver gets the horses going again. I assume he's off to put them in the stables.

"Come," Farwol guides me up a large stone staircase that leads to his home. It's not a castle. The stories I heard about his home all claimed it was a castle, but it's not quite big enough for that. It is, however, a large mansion, and the biggest home I've ever seen in real life.

As a child, I looked at picture books that showed beautiful homes. The houses were all large and brightly colored and impeccably decorated. They were all beautiful. This one is dark and scary: intimidating. This one looks like I'm going to my death, and in a way, I know I am.

I will never return home again.

I will never go to the village again.

Farwol made that clear when he allowed me to say goodbye to my father. I suppose I should be grateful he even gave me that mercy. Many captors wouldn't have permitted me that much, I'm sure.

We climb the stairs together and enter the mansion. The heavy doors swing open, but they don't creak. So Farwol takes care of his property. I suppose that should give me hope and a sense of peace since it means he likely won't break me and dispose of me.

But we've only just arrived.

I try not to gawk at the open entryway. The room we walk into is huge, spacious. It's beautiful. My entire childhood home would fit in just one corner of this place and it's only one room.

"Take off your shoes," Farwol says, and he points to a nearby chair. I hurry to it, moving quickly, and slip off my soft black slippers. Once they're off my feet, I stand awkwardly. The floor is cold beneath my bare toes. "Set them there," he motions to a small basket by the front door. I carry my shoes and set them in the correct spot. Then I return to Farwol's side.

I feel a little like a doll, or perhaps like a child following orders. So far, Farwol hasn't demanded anything terrible of me. For a brief second, I wonder if my stay here won't be as terrible as I imagine it could be. This house is much too nice to have a dungeon. I try to focus on that thought.

We move through the main room and walk toward a staircase. Farwol takes my hand as we ascend the stairs and when we reach the top, he doesn't let go. He guides me down several hallways. Within minutes, I'm completely turned around. I know that if I ever try to leave this place, I'll get lost before I even reach the front door.

Perhaps that's his goal, though.

Perhaps that's what he wants.

Farwol isn't what I expected, although to be fair, I'm not sure what I imagined. The villagers all claimed he was a monster, a beast. Is he really so terrible, though? Is it really so awful to collect on your debts? Is it really so terrible to demand payment?

I'm not sure.

I should be certain he's evil. He collected a woman for payment, after all, but somehow, I can't shake the feeling that he isn't as terrible as he seems.

We reach a door and he fetches a small key from his pocket. Then he unlocks the door. It's interesting to me that the room is locked. Perhaps this means he has servants or maybe other people live here. I haven't seen anyone and I sort of thought the house must be empty.

Farwol motions for me to go in first and then he follows, closing the door tightly behind us.

I look around the room, and I realize that I was wrong.

He is a monster.

Chapter 4

“What are you going to do to me?” I look around the room, taking it all in hastily. My heart is suddenly racing and I realize my excitement was grossly misplaced. How could I have been aroused by this man? How could I have been turned on at the idea of him spiriting me away? Something is wrong with me. Something is very, grossly, deeply wrong.

I am broken.

The room is empty except for shackles along all of the walls. There must be eight sets of shackles and there’s a pile of straw in the corner. Is that supposed to be a bed? Is that where I’m supposed to sleep? Is this my room now? Fear fills my heart as I realize I never truly appreciated the life I had before.

I can’t stay here.

I don’t want to be here.

“So you can speak,” Farwol says, cocking his head to the side. He looks amused.

“Of course I can speak.”

“You were strangely quiet on the way here. I was wondering how long it would take you to try to escape,” he says, but it’s not a judgment: it’s an observation.

“Is this it, then? Are you going to lock me up and leave me here to rot? Is this your dungeon?” The room smells of sweat and fear: possibly also of blood. There’s a bucket in the corner and I realize it’s for bodily fluids. I don’t want to stay here. I don’t want him to leave me here. I don’t want him to abandon me.

“That depends on you,” he says simply. “If you’re going to be a good girl and obey me, you may stay in an ordinary bedroom. This is a big house; there are plenty.”

“And if I don’t obey you?” I ask. I shouldn’t ask. I don’t want to know. I don’t want to know what he does to the girls who aren’t good, to the ones who are bad.

Farwol seems to grow even taller as he steps closer to me. He towers over me. I’m tall for a woman, so this is saying something. He makes me feel tiny, petite. He makes me feel fragile. He makes me feel afraid.

“Then you will be beaten,” he says. “You will be locked here, in this room, until I am ready to dispose of you. I have no need for an untrainable girl. I have no use for insolence.”

I glance at the room once more, tearing my eyes from the man who has stolen my freedom. How many girls have been here before me? The idea of taking someone’s daughter doesn’t seem to affect Farwol on any emotional level, so I must assume he’s done it before.

How many times?

How many women have been locked up in this room to die?

How many women have screamed, begged for their freedom?

How many women have died trying to escape?

No matter what Farwol demands of me, it will not be as bad as dying here alone. It will not be as bad as torture. It will not be as bad as this room.

“I will obey you,” I say. The words come out a whisper: a soft promise. I will do as he commands. I will be his.

Farwol looks at me for a moment, but he seems to be satisfied with my answer because he leads me out of the room and back into the hallway. He locks the room again and places the key back in his pocket. Then he guides me down two more halls until we reach another room.

This one is unlocked.

This one is large.

This one is his.

I know even before we step inside that he will be taking my virginity tonight. He is my new owner, after all, and there is no doubt in my mind he will view me as his property. My body is simply part of his prize.

We both go into the room. There's a large bed in the center that is beautifully decorated with thick, black blankets and purple pillows. A large sitting area has a sofa and two chairs arranged around a fireplace. There are several dressers and a large desk.

And, of course, there's Farwol himself.

"Undress," he says, closing the door behind us. I notice that he locks this door, too.

"Right now?" I ask in a squeaky voice. I've never been naked in front of a man before. I suppose I've never had the opportunity. The village boys always tried to take me out behind the apple orchard for some fun, but I resisted. I'm not sure why. I suppose I thought it would be improper, but something told me they wouldn't be as good at it as they seemed to think.

Farwol won't have that problem. I can already tell that anything that happens tonight will be controlled. He may push me, but only as far as he intends to. He will not lose control. He will also not be persuaded.

"Are you questioning orders so soon, Evelyn?" His words drip with disappointment, and I immediately begin pulling my dress over my head. I don't protest or apologize. I just obey. Something tells me this is what he wants most of all: obedience. Now I know he expects instant obedience without questioning, as well.

I'm naked beneath my dress. I hold the soft fabric in my hands, but don't move. My nipples are already hard and goose bumps form on my arms. I'm nervous, but I do my best not to show it.

Is Farwol the kind of man you can't show fear to? Is he the kind of man who would be disappointed if I started to cry? Or would he enjoy it? Is he the kind of person who craves tears?

I can't tell yet, but I won't be that person, either way. I won't be that girl. I won't be afraid.

I was raised better than that.

"So you can obey," he murmurs, and takes the dress from my hands. He turns around without sparing me a glance and hangs my dress in the wardrobe. I'm suddenly embarrassed at his actions and I cover my breasts with my arms. It wouldn't be so bad if he looked at me, admired me. Ignoring me makes me feel ashamed.

It makes me feel like I'm not good enough.

Farwol turns back around and sees that I've covered myself. "Drop your arms," he snaps sharply, and I instantly obey. He stalks toward me and grabs my hair, yanking my head back. He forces me to look into his eyes and I see darkness there. I see pain there. I see something I'm not supposed to see. I see him at his very core.

"You will not cover yourself," he says. "You will not hide your body from me. This," he pinches one of my nipples. "This is mine. These are mine. This body is mine. Do you understand?"

I try to nod, but he's pulling my hair back and moving is difficult.

"Yes," I whisper. "I understand, sir." I'm not sure why I called him "sir." I'm not sure if this is appropriate. I don't know his first name, though, and "Mr. Farwol" seems strange. The word seems to do something for him, though, because now he's the one closing his eyes and groaning.

"Say that again."

"Yes, sir," I say with growing confidence. "I will obey your commands."

Farwol kisses me then: my very first kiss. I'm not sure what I expected, but it wasn't this. Despite my lack of experience, my body seems to know how to respond to his touches, how to react to his tongue.

I'm wet, and aroused, and needy.

The kiss is an awakening. This isn't love. It never will be. This was never meant to be love, but it is desire. It is passion. It is something much more feral, something much more powerful than love.

His hands are in my hair, but he lowers them, tracing gentle lines on my back until he reaches my bottom. Farwol grabs me and pulls me closer to him. I can feel his hardness against my belly, can feel exactly how much this kiss is affecting him, and I like it.

I shouldn't enjoy this, shouldn't want more. I should be afraid, and I am, a little. I'm not nearly as scared as I ought to be, though. I'm more curious than frightened. If Farwol can affect me this much with a kiss, what can he do with the rest of his body? What other things can he do to me? What else can he make me feel?

His hands move around to my front. He moves slowly, so as to not frighten me, I suppose. He moves with determination, with experience. He moves with a grace I don't have yet. He moves with purpose.

Farwol keeps kissing me as his hands reach my breasts. Heat fills my body as he begins to massage me. I've never been touched there, never had another person play with my body like it was a toy, like it was just for them. He bounces my breasts for a moment, but then Farwol begins to move his fingers in small circles on them.

"Oh," I whisper against his mouth. "Oh..." I close my eyes and keep kissing him. Farwol doesn't stop touching me. Instead, he picks up speed, moving faster. He does other things to my breasts. He pinches my nipples and twists them. Then he holds my breasts in his hands and massages their entirety at once. I feel dizzy with excitement.

I didn't know I would feel this way.

I didn't know this sort of feeling was possible.

I didn't know this could happen to a plain, ordinary girl like me.

Suddenly, I don't feel like the village butcher's daughter anymore. Suddenly, I don't feel like the poverty-stricken girl with worn clothing. Suddenly, I don't feel like the girl who fades into the background. Suddenly, I feel bright. I feel bold. I feel colorful.

I feel alive.

Suddenly, I feel like this is the moment I've been waiting for. This is the feeling I've been dreaming of. This is the experience I've needed my entire life.

My head spins as Farwol keeps touching me and in a fit of braveness, I move my hands to touch him, too. He tenses for just a second, perhaps in surprise, but doesn't resist, so I allow my hands to explore his body, too.

I've never been close to a man like this. I've never run my hands over someone's chest: never felt their tight body beneath my palms. I've never run my hands down lower, lower, lower. I've never gripped a man's length.

I do that now, though, and it's Farwol's turn to groan.

"Don't stop," he whispers. "Whatever you do, Evelyn, don't stop."

Chapter 5

I close my eyes.

Farwol smells masculine: like pine trees, like winter.

He smells like he's going to let me lose myself for a little while. He smells like danger.

I rub my hands over his body, exploring every inch within reach. Gradually, he moves his kisses from my mouth to my neck. Slowly, carefully, he nibbles on my shoulder. I'm not sure if I should like this or not. It's a strange sensation.

Farwol bites harder, and that, I do like. I groan at the pain and clench my thighs tightly closed, protecting myself. Farwol chuckles; my movement didn't escape his notice. I think he knows exactly what he's doing to me, exactly how he's affecting me, and I think he likes it.

I think he likes the way I'm a little turned on by danger.

I think he likes that I'm a little excited by pain.

The feeling that something is wrong with me floats through my body, but I try to squash it. There's no time for embarrassment right now. There's no time to be ashamed. There's no time to be worried or uncomfortable with what's happening.

Right now, all I need to do is focus on obeying Farwol's every command. I just need to focus on doing exactly what he desires of me.

Then everything will be okay.

He moves me back to the bed and pulls away. For a moment, I mourn the loss of his touch. He's only a foot away, but suddenly, that seems so far.

"Turn around and put your hands on the bed, Evelyn." I swallow hard, but do as he asks. The blanket is soft beneath my hands and the wooden floor is chilly beneath my feet. The difference in texture overwhelms my senses as I wait in anticipation to see what he's going to do to me.

I'm not sure if I want to know what he's going to do to me.

I'm not sure if I'm going to survive it.

I hear Farwol moving around. I think he's taking his clothes off. His shoes hit the floor and there's a rustle of fabric, but then nothing. He doesn't start touching me, doesn't start speaking.

Is he watching me?

Is he looking at me?

I've never been this open, this vulnerable to anyone's gaze before. I'm not sure if my legs should be closed or open. Should I move my feet? Should I lean over more? Should my breasts be against the blanket or should they be dangling?

"Don't over-think," Farwol's voice cuts through the air. "You look stunning. Do you know that?"

"No, sir," I whisper.

"Have you ever been with a man, Evelyn?" His voice sounds closer now. He's nearer. I wonder if he's going to touch me because I really want him to touch me. I want his hands on me again. I want his tongue on my skin. I want to feel his body connect with mine.

I've never wanted anything as bad as I want Farwol in this moment and I'm not sure whether I should stay quiet or fall to my knees and beg him to take me. I don't know where I want to go or what I want to do, but I know Farwol knows, and I trust him to get me there.

I have the feeling that if I let him, and if I please him, that Farwol will make me fly, and that's kind of fantastic.

"I've never been with a man before," I tell him.

“What about kissing?”

“Never.”

“This is your first time,” he says, and then he touches me. His hands are on the backs of my thighs and I feel his breath against my spine. He presses his lips to me and it just makes me more wet, more anxious. I can feel a need within my core rising. My thighs are slick with desire and he touches me there.

“Yes,” I whisper. “Although, I’m guessing you’ve been with women before,” I add, feeling a little brave, a little curious.

He chuckles in response and moves his hands the rest of the way up my thighs. He settles one hand between my legs and begins to stroke me there. I bite my lip and lose all rational thought at the touch. It’s the most incredible thing I’ve ever felt and somehow, I can’t help but wonder why I’ve never done this before.

I never knew it could be like this.

“Don’t move,” he says, and he keeps touching me. Forwal strokes my body over and over and over. I forget everything except his hand on me. All thoughts of my day fade away. I’m not worried about the village anymore. I’m not missing my father. I’m not wondering why he borrowed money from Forwal or why he won’t pay.

All I’m doing is hoping this moment never ends.

My heart soars and my body begins to sing. The feeling starts between my legs but spreads to my core, to my very being.

“That’s it, Evelyn,” Forwal murmurs. “Come now. Come.” He keeps rubbing my body, keeps touching me, and I feel like my entire body explodes with pleasure. I shake, and my vision goes dark. Everything about my world fades away but contentment. Everything vanishes but peace.

Everything disappears except the knowledge that Forwal carried me to this place and he knew exactly what he was doing.

Everything goes away but the understanding that I am totally, completely his.

He holds my life in his hands. He can make it hell or he can make it what it is now: pure bliss, pure happiness.

Exhausted, I collapse forward on the bed, but he’s not done with me yet. He’s not finished. Forwal rakes his nails down my sides and over my hips. Then he settles his hands on my bottom and pulls me back toward him. I feel him nudging at my entrance. I feel him pressing there. I’m wet: completely soaked. I’m drenched.

“This will hurt,” he warns, and then he thrusts inside me.

I try not to cry. I try not to tear up or to make noises, but despite the previous pleasure, this intrusion is painful. Forwal holds still, allowing me to get used to his size.

“You’re okay,” he whispers, and he strokes my hair softly. He reaches forward and brushes his fingers over my cheek. They’re wet with my tears, wet with my pain. “Everything is going to be fine, Evelyn.”

After a moment, I become accustomed to him, to the way he fills me. Then he begins to move slowly, carefully inside of me. It’s not uncomfortable anymore. In fact, it feels nice, normal.

And after another minute, it starts to feel really, really good.

It starts to feel incredible.

When Forwal comes, he releases inside of me with a groan. He pulls my hair when he comes, forcing my head back, forcing me to watch him as he orgasms. His own eyes close, but mine are open, and I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything quite as exotic or arousing as the look on his face at that

moment.

Peace.

It's a look of peace.

And it's a look I put on his face.

I did that.

And this feeling is completely wonderful.

Chapter 6

When we're finished, Forwal climbs into bed and pulls me close to him. We sleep curled up together in his bedroom like lovers instead of strangers. I suppose that's what we are now: lovers. It's an unusual feeling, but it's good.

The next day, he helps me out of bed and hands me a clean dress.

"What's this?"

"You need clothes," he says, as if this should have been obvious.

"Thank you," I whisper, and slide the dress over my head. "What about shoes?" He's wearing shoes, and my feet feel cold.

"Not for you," he says.

"Afraid I'll run away?" I say it with a smile, a little smirk, but he doesn't think it's funny. Forwal's eyes darken and he glares at me. My stomach feels tight and suddenly, I feel like I've messed up. I chide myself inwardly. I need to be better than this. I need to remember my place. I need to remember who I am.

Forwal is not my friend.

He is my abductor.

Last night was amazing. It was fantastic, really, and it felt incredible. It felt like I was flying. I've never felt that way before and I crave it. I've had a taste for what he can offer me and although I've given up my old life, I wonder if that's really such a bad thing.

Instantly, I feel terrible for thinking this.

I should be missing my father, crying for him.

I should be terrified, but I'm not.

I'm not.

"Come." Forwal beckons for me to follow him and I trot obediently after him as we leave the room. The mansion looks just as intimidating in the daylight as it did at night. Perhaps more so. Dark paintings line the wall. I didn't notice them before.

"Did you paint these?" I point to the walls.

"No."

"Did someone make them for you?"

"Yes."

I bite my tongue and remain quiet as I follow him through the maze of hallways. Eventually, we reach a kitchen, where he introduces me to his household staff members.

"Mrs. Paughts runs the house," he tells me. A round, smiling older woman steps forward.

"It's lovely to meet you, my dear," she says. She takes my hand and smiles at me, and my heart warms. If I had a mother, I imagine she'd be something like Mrs. Paughts.

"The pleasure is mine," I murmur.

I was convinced the entire mansion was empty, save for me and Forwal. I'm surprised to discover over a dozen household staff members, and I struggle to remember their names.

Once the introductions are complete, Forwal turns to his staff.

"She's not allowed outside," he says.

"Yes, Master," the staff murmurs in unison, and I frown. I'm not allowed to go outside? Why on Earth not? It's not like I have anywhere to go, anything to return to. It's not like I have anything waiting for me.

We leave the kitchen and as soon as we're out of hearing distance, I take Forwal's hand and squeeze it.

He looks down at my hand, as if he can't quite believe that I'm touching him. He doesn't get angry, but he is obviously very surprised by the gesture.

"What do you want, Evelyn?" He asks me.

"I...I can't go outside?"

"No. You may not go outside."

"But why not?"

He sighs and brushes back a lock of my hair. Then he brings me close to himself and holds me for a long minute.

"I don't know if I can trust you," he says finally.

"I haven't run yet. There were plenty of chances last night, sir."

"You were in shock, and I had someone watching you. You wouldn't have gotten very far, darling, even if you had tried to run."

"I won't run."

"The woods are dangerous," his eyes darken, and he shakes his head. "You have no idea what lurks there, and you must never know."

I search his face, trying to discover the truth. Surely there must be some there, lurking beneath the surface, but when I stare at Forwal, I only have more questions.

Why has he brought me here?

What does he want from me?

What debt does my father owe him?

Will the debt ever be repaid?

And what must I do to repay him?

These questions whirl around in my head, threatening to overtake me. Forwal seems to notice my sudden distress, because he pulls me close to himself and holds me tightly, quietly, for a long minute.

Eventually, my breathing slows, and I calm down. I'm okay. I'm fine. Everything is going to be all right.

"Evelyn," he says slowly, but I shake my head.

"I'm fine."

"You're not fine," he lifts my chin with one finger and looks at me. His eyes search mine, and he finally sighs. "I wish I could tell you that you're safe here," he whispers. He doesn't finish the sentence. He doesn't have to.

We both know I'm not safe.

I won't ever be safe again.

After a minute, he releases me from his hold and guides me deeper into the mansion. He opens the door to a new room and motions for me to go in. I hesitate for just a second, but then I steel myself. It can't be as bad as the dungeon room. It just can't be. I walk ahead and what I see takes my breath away.

A library.

He's got a library.

I turn around and look at him.

"How?"

"How what?"

"You have so many books in here. Have you read them all?"

“Not all of them. Quite a few. I have a lifetime to work on them, though. Go ahead,” he motions toward a chair and I go take a seat. He plucks a book from a shelf and carries it to me. “Have you read this one?”

“No.”

“Read it,” he says. “I’ll return for you in an hour.”

He leaves the room and closes the door. For a minute, I think I’ll be free to roam the mansion, but then I hear the click of the door locking, and I am a prisoner once more.

Chapter 7

Forwal returns for me later. I don't have a timepiece, so I have no way of telling exactly how long it took for him to come back. I do know that I read four chapters of the story. At one point, someone dropped off food for me, which I instantly devoured. Apparently, being kidnapped hasn't doused my appetite.

"Interesting?" Forwal nods toward the book.

I hold it up to him. "Yes. Very."

"Which part are you at?"

"The part with the sailor," I chuckle quietly. "And the monkey."

"Ah, yes," Forwal smiles slightly, and I realize he's not only read this book before, but also enjoyed it. Is this one of his favorites? Is this his way of letting me into his life a little bit?

Just as instantly as his smile appeared, it vanishes, and he takes me by the arm.

"Where are we going?" I ask.

"To my room."

"But...it's daytime," I try to stall.

"Quiet," he snaps, his good mood gone. I'm dismal and quiet as we return to his bedroom. We pass a few people on the way, but each person averts their eyes when they see me. They're all obviously completely loyal to Forwal. They're completely devoted to him.

Even if I wanted to run away, which I don't, I wouldn't be able to.

One of them would catch me, or tell on me, and I have a feeling I wouldn't enjoy the punishment Forwal deemed necessary.

He isn't the type of person I want to make mad. I don't want to upset him. I've seen firsthand exactly what he can do, although I still don't know what my father owed him for. Why did Papa borrow money from this man? Why did Papa go to Forwal? I know many people owe him debts, but I will never understand why they decided to ask him for money in the first place.

They should have known what kind of a man he was.

They should have known he was a monster.

When we reach Forwal's room, he steps aside so I can enter first. This is something I'm slowly becoming accustomed to. He opens a door and I go through it, and then he follows. I don't know if it's good manners or if he's simply controlling me little by little.

I turn to him, and he closes the door. Then he locks it.

"What happens now?" I ask quietly.

"You know what happens, Evelyn." He motions for me to take off my dress, and slowly, I remove it. I'm not sad or scared to be here right now. I'm more curious than anything else.

I have the feeling that I'm being given a unique opportunity to find out who Forwal really is: not who he pretends to be when everyone else is watching. There's no doubt in my mind that he's dark and twisted inside. No one could steal a woman without being a little messed up in the head, but there's more to him than just that.

What?

And how can I access this part of him no one else seems to be able to?

I toss my dress on the floor, but he shakes his head.

"You should take better care of your things," he says. "That was a gift. Pick up your dress, Evelyn."

He's talking to me like I'm a petulant child and while I find it slightly embarrassing, I don't think he's being mean. The dress is obviously expensive, and shouldn't be on the floor. I pick it up and place it carefully on a nearby chair. He nods.

"Better," Forwal says. "Now kneel before me."

I know what he's going to make me do even before we begin. I've never done this before, but girls always whisper about such things. I know what happens, and although I have no experience with it, I'm not afraid.

He quietly unbuttons his shirt and sets it aside. His shoes, socks, and pants follow. Finally, he removes his undergarments, and that's when I see him fully nude before me.

I lick my lips, and he chuckles.

"You're excited, and curious," he notes, and I nod.

"I've never..."

"Obviously. That's all right. Come here."

I scoot forward on my knees, and this pleases him. He pets my hair gently.

"Such a sweet girl," he murmurs, and for just a second, I wonder if that's a hint of regret I hear in his voice. It can't be because Forwal is the kind of man who doesn't have regrets. He doesn't hold back. He takes what he wants, when he wants, how he wants.

He's not thinking twice about what he's going to do to me.

He's just doing it.

There's a part of me that loves this, and I know that's wrong. I should be fighting him. I should be trying to escape. I should be looking for ways I can run away, but I'm not. I'm not doing anything. I'm just accepting my fate.

And what does that say about me?

It says I'm messed up.

Weak.

It says there's something about me so dark, so twisted, that I like the way he's looking at me. I like what he's doing to me. I like that he's forcing me to be this way for him.

I look up at him, and he nods, almost imperceptibly, but I notice. I stare at his length for a long minute. Now that it's up close, I'm nervous, but I shouldn't be. Plenty of women before me have done this. I can do it now. How difficult could it actually be?

Slowly, I lean forward and stick my tongue out. I swirl it around the edge of his cock. He sucks in a breath, and I know I'm on the right track. I keep my eyes open so I can see what I'm doing, and I slowly start to lick up and down each side of him.

"Good girl," he murmurs, and I feel happy, content, that he offered such a genuine compliment. A rush of satisfaction rushes through me as I realize that all those little noises he's making are because of me. He's groaning because of me. He's moaning, hissing, because of what I am doing to him.

That feels good, and I keep going.

Slowly, I tease his body. I reach up and grasp his balls as I slide his cock down my throat. He moans again, louder this time, and I keep going. Each sound he makes excites me more and more, and I am thrust into the realization that this *is* who I am.

This is the type of girl I am.

This is the type of *woman* I am.

I'm not just the butcher's daughter.

I'm not just some kidnapped damsel.

I'm more than that, and I'm proving it right now.

When Forwal releases into my mouth, he pulls my hair.

“Swallow,” he commands. I didn’t realize there was any other option, but I obey, just the same. I do as he asks of me, as he wills, as he desires.

When he’s finished, he looks down at me for a long time. What thoughts are running through that pretty head of his? Is he happy he decided to take me? Is he trying to decide if he’ll keep me?

I don’t know what happens to Forwal’s women once he gets bored of them, once he gets tired of them. I know without asking I’m not the first woman he’s taken. I don’t think I’ll be the last.

And I don’t think he’ll free me.

I should be trying to escape, but I don’t have it in me.

There’s something about him that’s not what it seems, and something tells me I’ve only scratched the surface.

Chapter 8

After a few days in the library, Forwal lets me roam the house. After that, I spend each day exploring the mansion. I stay far away from the dungeon; I already know what secrets that particular room holds. The rest of the house proves to be far more interesting, anyway. There is an entire room full of paintings on the third floor and on the fourth, there's a room with a giant dollhouse. I could stay here forever, I realize, and I probably will.

A week passes quickly. Forwal goes off during the day and I don't see him again until after supper. The household staff and I fall into a sort of comfortable companionship. They leave me alone, for the most part, and I stay out of their ways. I might be Forwal's toy, but I don't want to be a burden on the people he actually employs, assuming he didn't kidnap them, as well.

I don't miss my father as much as I should, I realize one day. I don't miss the village as much as an ordinary person would miss her home. I haven't spent much time crying and I haven't spent much time thinking about the people I know.

I haven't wondered if they've thought of me.

I haven't wondered if they've missed me.

And then, one night, after Forwal and I climb into bed together tired, sweaty, and exhausted, I ask him the one thing I *have* been curious about all this time.

"Why did my father borrow money from you?" My words hang in the air, though, and Forwal doesn't answer me right away. This makes me think that when he does answer me, his words are going to cut me to my core. This makes me think that whatever business my father has gotten himself wrapped up in, it's nothing good.

It's nothing proper.

"Someone saw something they weren't supposed to see," he says slowly, carefully. "Someone discover some...information...about your father and they threatened him. He needed to pay them for their silence, but he didn't have the money."

"So he came to you," I say.

"He came to me," Forwal agrees.

"What did they see?" I ask the question even though I know Forwal won't tell me. If he wanted me to know my father's sins, he would have already shared them. I've been with him long enough to know when I should remain silent, but my curiosity has bested me tonight.

"We all have our secrets, Evelyn," is all he says. "Now go to sleep." Forwal wraps me up in his arms and closes his eyes. He does this every night and I'm not sure whether it's to keep me safe or to keep me from running away, but I close my eyes, too, and sleep comes to me.

When I wake, he's already gone for the day. I clean my face and change into a dress. He's provided many for me. Forwal has been nothing if not considerate of my needs. Before I can even anticipate what I might want or have need of, he seems to have it covered.

Mrs. Paughts is in the kitchen baking bread when I prance into the room. I look around, but there are no other servants. She seems to be doing everything by herself today.

"Good morning, child," she says. She always calls me child, although I am quite obviously a woman. An adult. Only, there's a part of me that doesn't feel that way anymore. Forwal has made it very clear what I am.

His.

“Good morning, Mrs. Paughts. Need a hand?”

“Always. Here,” she hands me a rolling pin and directs me toward some dough. “Get to work,” she says, and I do. Luckily, when I was growing up, I cooked for my father. I may not have had a mama, but I had Papa, and he taught me everything I know about how to prepare a meal.

Mrs. Paughts and I work side-by-side for nearly an hour. By the time we’re finished with the breads, it’s mid-morning.

“Mrs. Paughts,” I say slowly. “It’s such a lovely morning. Might I go for a walk outdoors?”

She looks at me warily. “You know what the Master said,” she tells me. “You’re to stay indoors until such a time as you can be trusted not to leave.”

“Surely it’s all right for me to go now,” I tell her. “I’ve been here for awhile now, and I haven’t tried to leave. I know my place,” I say seriously. “I won’t run away.”

She hesitates for a few seconds, trying to make up her mind. I know I’m putting her in a difficult position, but I’ve been cooped up much more than any proper girl should be, and I’m anxious. I’m ready to get out and see my new world. I’m ready to explore, even if it’s only the yard.

“You have to stay close to the house,” she lowers her voice. “There are...creatures in the forest. It’s not just a story, dear. There are monsters, and they will come for you.”

“I won’t go in the woods,” I promise solemnly.

She sighs, and then nods curtly. “Only for half an hour. Then you come right back. You hear?”

“Oh, thank you!” I wrap my arms around Mrs. Paughts and she stiffens in surprise, but then relaxes. “I’ll come back. I swear it.”

I hurry out the back before she has a chance to change her mind, and as soon as the door closes behind me, I sigh in relief.

I’m alone.

Finally.

For far too long, I’ve been indoors, carefully guarded by watchful eyes, and now I’m outside.

And I’m alone.

I’m still barefoot, which I know is part of Forwal’s plan to keep me close to him. He doesn’t let me wear shoes because he thinks if my feet are protected, I’ll brave going in the forest.

He doesn’t realize that I like being here.

I like being with him.

I like this world far more than I should.

There’s something comfortable about being here, something that makes me feel safe in a way I never have before. It’s a strange feeling, this safety, and sometimes I wonder if it’s wrong.

Shouldn’t I have felt safe with my father?

Shouldn’t I have felt comfortable in the village?

I walk around the exterior of the mansion. The grass is soft and lush beneath my feet, and as I walk, I can’t help but feel amazement at this place I’ve been taken. There are flowers everywhere. When Forwal brought me here, it was night, and I couldn’t see very much. The mansion looked terrifying and dangerous. In the sunshine, though, it looks beautiful, and sweet.

It looks like a home.

There are a few people walking around outside working in the yard. One man is gardening and another is painting an outside building, but they seem to ignore me as I wander around the grounds.

How does Forwal manage to live here so peacefully?

So calmly?

How does he manage this incredible life, yet still seem like a monster in so many ways?

My father was terrified of him. There's no doubt in my mind about that.

He was horrified, and I've never seen Papa scared before. Not of anything. Even when my Mama died, Papa was brave, and bold, and ferocious. He didn't let anything scare him, but things have changed.

When Forwal came, my papa was trying everything he could to raise the money he needed in time, but it just wasn't enough. Papa tried to save me, but now that I've been here awhile, I have to wonder if Forwal was the one who saved me.

It's a strange thought, but it's been lurking in my mind ever since I arrived.

I try not to think too much about it. I know that when someone is stolen away, they eventually form an unusual bond with their captor. That's normal. I read about it once, long ago, in a book I found.

Still, I can't deny that life is much more interesting here at the mansion, much more fascinating. Forwal is a mystery even I can't seem to solve. I'm not sure where he goes during the day or what his businesses are, but I do know that when he comes back at the end of each day and I get to wrap myself up in his arms, I feel complete.

I feel whole.

I feel good.

My mind wanders as I explore the yard, careful to stay away from the tree line. There's no fence around the property, but I notice the other workers are also careful to stay away from the trees.

What monsters lurk in there?

Are they worse than the ones I've already seen?

Are they worse than Forwal?

Perhaps it's because I was promised he was a monster that I don't feel as frightened as I should right now. That's the entire problem. Ever since he took me, I've been feeling things very, very deeply, but none of the emotions I'm experiencing are the ones I ought to be feeling.

Instead, I'm feeling things like excitement, curiosity, arousal.

Each feeling that fills me is the wrong one, and I'm not really sure what to do about it.

I'm so wrapped up in my thoughts, though, that I don't realize I'm getting closer and closer to the tree line.

I don't realize that I'm walking farther and farther from the house.

I don't realize there's a creature watching me from the darkness.

I don't realize I'm being taken until it's too late.

Before I can even scream, it grabs me and pulls me into the darkness of the forest, and the last real thought I have is that I should have listened to Forwal.

I should have stayed away from the forest.

Chapter 9

I open my mouth to scream, but the creature covers my mouth with a furry paw. It's big, and standing on his hinders like a bear or a human, but it doesn't look like anything I've ever seen before. I try to bite it with my teeth, but it's holding onto me way too tightly. My back is to its front, so I can't get a clear view of what it is, exactly, but I realize suddenly that this is it.

This is the end.

This is how I die.

It's a funny thing, really. This realization that the end has come isn't what I thought it would be. I thought that memories of my father would flash through my head, that visions of what life could have been like would flame through my heart, but that's not what happens.

That's not what happens at all.

Instead, I think of Forwal.

I think of his face, and the way he smiles when he thinks no one is looking.

I think of how fierce he is with me.

I think of how tender he is.

And I think of how no matter what happens, I will never regret being his.

There is no doubt in my heart that I am totally, completely his. I shouldn't be. I know that just as well, just as much, but I didn't have a choice in this. I didn't have a choice about falling in love with the monster, yet I have.

And now that I'm about to perish in the forest, just yards away from the house where we live together, I can't help but wish for just a little more time with him.

I can't help but wish things could have lasted a little bit longer.

I should have told him how I felt.

The creature drags me deeper into the forest. I continue to struggle. He won't take me without a fight. I know that much. He can be as big and mean and scary as he wants, but I'm Forwal's girl, and I won't go down without a fight.

I'll make him proud.

Later, when they notice I'm gone, they'll see my heel prints in the dirt from where I dug them into the ground. They'll see the broken branches and crushed grass from where I shook, kicking and fighting as much as I could. They'll see the evidence that I wasn't taken of my own free will.

I fought, and I fought hard.

The creature loosens its grip on my mouth slightly, and I take advantage of the moment by opening my mouth wide and biting down on its hand. It squeals: a terrible, shrill shriek, and I begin to scream.

"Help me! Help! I've been taken! Help me!"

Before I know what's happening, the creature pushes me to the ground and kicks me in the head. Pain shoots through my whole body, and I start to see double. My vision is blurry and the world is spinning, but I scream again, and again, and again.

I scream, and it kicks me in the stomach. My body threatens to vomit, but I manage to hold my stomach together as I yell for help.

Someone has to come.

They have to save me.

Forwal.

I don't know if he'll be able to find me. I don't know if he'll make it in time, but I know that if

he's nearby, he'll hear me, and he'll come for me. He will always save me. I just know it.

Suddenly, the creature growls loudly, and I open my eyes. It looms over me and I get my first clear look at it. I can't tell what it is. It looks like a mixture of a wolf and a bear, and it looks angry.

It's going to kill me. We both know it's only a matter of seconds, and as the creature raises one furry paw, I can see its claws glinting in the afternoon rays of light.

One swipe, and it'll all be over.

I close my eyes, ready for the inevitable, but then I hear it.

Voices in the forest.

"She's over here!"

"I can see her!"

"It's got her!"

"Move!"

I close my eyes, squeezing them shut. I still feel dizzy, and everything hurts. There's no way I can move, even if I wanted to, but I don't have to.

Someone has come for me. Someone has come to save me.

Forwal.

It has to be him. I know he's come. He wouldn't let anything bad happen to me. He'll do anything in his power to protect me. I know this more than I know anything else.

The pain grows and worsens, threatening to force me into sleep, and I struggle to stay awake. The creature is screaming, and someone else is yelling. Several someone's. They've come for me.

They've come to save me from the monster.

I hear a loud thump, and I know without opening my eyes that they've killed it. It's dead. I just know it, and I don't care. I should be sad that something has died today, but I'm not. I'm relieved, and overwhelmed, and I'm so very, very tired.

"Open your eyes, Evelyn," I hear his voice, and I have no choice but to obey. No matter what happens to me, I know that I must obey Forwal. There are some times I have options, but this is not one of those times. Even though it hurts, and I feel nauseous, I open my eyes.

And I see him.

He looks so strong, so fierce, but there's something else there in his eyes.

Fear.

Why is Forwal afraid?

He's never afraid.

He's my brave, brave monster.

He'll never let anything happen to me.

"Can you understand what I'm saying?" He asks. "Did he hurt you?"

"Yes," I whisper. "He kicked my head."

Forwal curses, but lifts me into his arms. The motion is fast and my stomach turns, but I manage to keep from vomiting. I can see the monster lying on the ground: an arrow sticking out of its left eye.

"Close your eyes," he whispers. "I'm taking you home, Evelyn."

"I don't want to go back to the village," I say, surprising myself. The idea of returning to my father sickens me and I don't know why. I can't imagine leaving Forwal. I can't imagine leaving this life we have here together. I just can't.

I don't want a world without him in it.

I only want him.

He pauses and stops walking. I can feel him looking down at me, so I open my eyes and reach for

his face.

“Please let me stay here with you,” I whisper.

After a long minute, he nods. “That’s what I meant, love. This is your home now. You belong here with me.”

Relief fills me, and I close my eyes as he moves out of the forest, back to the house, and upstairs to our room. I hear Mrs. Paughts and some other people come into the room, and soon people are touching me, prodding me, making sure I’m okay.

I barely move as they touch me, instead choosing to keep my eyes closed as they check me over.

“She’s going to be fine,” I hear a male voice say with authority. A doctor. He must be a doctor.

“You’re sure?” Forwal says.

“I’m positive,” the man assures him, and then I hear him leave the room, along with several other people. The bed shifts, and I know Forwal is sitting with me now.

“You saved me,” I whisper.

“Evelyn, how did you end up in the woods? I told you not to go there.” I can’t tell if he’s angry or scared. I force my eyes open despite the pain, despite the inevitable swelling of my face, and I reach for him.

“I didn’t try to run away. I was just walking outside. I promise, I wasn’t trying to leave.”

He looks at me for awhile, as if he’s trying to determine whether or not I’m lying. I’m not lying to him. I’m being perfectly honest. The truth is that I can’t imagine not being with him.

I can’t imagine going back to my own world.

I’m not missing anything. The butcher’s daughter didn’t exactly have a raging social life. I wasn’t popular and I wasn’t interesting and I didn’t do anything. I was just me. I was just ordinary.

Granted, I’m still the same girl, but being here feels different somehow. I feel a bit bolder, braver. I feel stronger than I’ve ever felt before. It’s a bit ironic since Forwal took my virginity and has been molding me into a woman. I should feel weak, taken advantage of.

I don’t.

“I believe you,” he says finally. “But in the future, be more careful, love. I don’t know what I’d do if something ever happened to you.”

His voice is quiet: a whisper, a promise.

Then he kisses me softly, and once again, everything else fades away.

Chapter 10

Time passes slowly at the mansion and as it does, Forwal and I grow closer. He teaches me how to please him, how to touch him in different ways. He shows me how to use my body in ways that delight him, in ways that bring him the utmost pleasure.

When we're not playing in his room, we sometimes go to the library together and read. Forwal's deep voice has a way of bringing the characters from my favorite stories to life. His words have a way of making me forget that I am a kidnapped girl, that I was taken against my will. His words make me forget that I should be upset to be here, but that I'm not. His words make me feel safe.

His words make me feel like I am finally home.

I am finally at peace.

I am finally comfortable.

And then the three moons align and everything changes.

It's an ordinary day like any other, but somehow, I think I should have known. I think I should have realized that this momentary reprieve from the rest of the world couldn't last. I should have recognized that sometimes, we don't always get what we want.

Sometimes the monsters that find us are not the ones we expected.

I'm in the kitchen when I hear the shouts, the cries. I'm with Mrs. Paughts when we hear the disturbance from outside.

"Get Forwal," she says quickly, harshly. "Run, girl, run!" I drop the pot I'm cleaning and take off down the hallway and up the stairs. I can't find Forwal anywhere, though. He should be in his office or in the library. In just a few hours, he's supposed to go to the village and collect the debts owed him. Why can't I find him?

I search the second floor and the third, and finally I realize the only place I haven't looked for him is the dungeon.

The only place I haven't looked is *that* room.

I don't think he's in there, but there's something happening outside and I need to find him before it's too late. I need to warn him that someone is coming, that something is happening. I need to find him and tell him.

Something bad is going to happen.

Someone has come, and judging by the cries outside, they brought reinforcements. There are plenty of people who don't like Forwal, plenty of people who would want to hurt him, and the thought pains me.

I don't want anything to happen to him.

I need to save him the way he saved me.

I get to the dungeon room and when I place my hand on the knob, I'm surprised it turns easily. I push the door open and sure enough, Forwal is in the center of the room. He's standing with his back to me. He's staring at the shackles on the wall. He doesn't move, but I know he hears me breathing. I'm out of shape and the running has me gasping for breath.

"Forwal," I say, but he just shakes his head.

"There were three girls before you," he says, and suddenly, I'm quiet because I've never heard him talk about the ones who came before me. I knew there had to be other women, other girls he had stolen. Why else would he have a room like this?

But he's never talked about them before.

He's never mentioned them.

He's never opened up to me.

No, Forwal, for all of the things I love about him, is essentially a closed book. He keeps his guard up constantly. He never relaxes, and he never calms down. He can't. He doesn't have time for that.

For Forwal, letting his guard down could mean getting killed. It could mean betrayal. It could mean a thousand things, and none of those are good. So he guards his secrets, and he maintains his privacy, and he doesn't talk about the other women he has taken.

Until now.

"The first girl I thought I was saving. Her father beat her, and I took her away. I brought her here, gave her a room, and left her alone, but she ran away at the first opportunity. She ran away and she left and she was lost in the forest."

"There are wild animals in the forest," I repeat the warning he gave me the first day. I think of the creature that grabbed me when I wandered too close.

I still have bruises, and sometimes I even have nightmares.

The creature completely caught me off guard. I wasn't paying the closest of attention, but it completely ambushed me. I was lucky that Forwal and his workers saved me. I was lucky he heard my cry. If he hadn't found me when he did, I would have died. I would have been torn apart, completely eviscerated by the creature.

"We found her in pieces," Forwal says. His eyes hold a certain sadness, but he keeps going. "The second girl, I locked up. It seemed fitting. I was saving her from the prison she was in, but I only replaced it with a different one. When I was sure she wouldn't run away, I gave her a room, but she ran anyway."

He shakes his head sadly, and I can clearly read his emotions.

He's wondering what he did wrong.

He's wondering why he wasn't enough for them.

He's wondering why he couldn't save them.

If anyone could have saved them, it should have been him.

He should have been able to, but he couldn't, and now it eats away at him. Forwal has a dark, fierce exterior, and he is merciless when it comes to loaning money to people. The debts *will* be repaid, one way or another. They must be, so he must be strong.

There's another side to him, though, and I have the feeling I am one of the very few people who gets to see that side.

There's a side to Forwal that isn't so strong, that isn't so hardened.

"Oh, Forwal," I move forward and come up behind him. I wrap my arms around him from behind, pulling his back to my chest. I lean my cheek against his back. "It wasn't your fault," I say. "They were scared. You couldn't have done anything to prevent this, and you didn't do anything wrong. They were just afraid."

"We never found the second girl," he whispers. "I don't know what happened to her." I continue to hold him tightly, and I just focus on breathing.

In and out.

In and out.

In and out.

We can do this. We can get through this moment. We can do this and somehow, everything will be okay.

"What about the third girl?" I shouldn't ask, but I suddenly need to know. I desperately need to

understand, and Forwal might not be as forthcoming with information in the future. “Did you lock her in the dungeon, too?”

He nods, but doesn’t speak for a long time, and I wonder what he’s thinking. I wonder what makes him think of the other women, of the ones who came before. I wonder what makes him consider these memories from the past.

I wonder what makes Forwal go to that place.

There’s so much about him that no one knows. He’s a mysterious recluse: someone people need, but whom they are terribly afraid of. He’s someone who doesn’t ask for what he wants. He simply demands it and he receives what he asks for.

Demanding is always easier, though, because you don’t have to deal with the possibility of being rejected. No one is going to tell you *no* if you don’t give them a choice. No one is going to embarrass you or humiliate you by turning you down. When you demand, you receive. When you ask, you take a risk.

“She lived here in the dungeon for a very long time,” Forwal says.

“Did you save her?”

“I saved her.”

“From what?”

“A fate much worse than me.”

“She died,” I say, but it’s not a question. It’s obvious. Three times Forwal has tried to save people and three times they have died. This obviously hurts his heart. He’s obviously had to carry this burden alone.

He doesn’t say anything and even though I want to ask him more about it, even though I want to hear more about it, I know there isn’t time for that. Not right now.

“Mrs. Paughts sent me,” I tell him. He pulls away and turns around to face me. Confusion fills his face, but then it clouds over with suspicion.

“Why?”

“There’s a disturbance.”

“Someone is coming for me,” he says. This is not a question, and I nod slowly.

“Good,” he says. “Let them come. Now leave me.”

I watch him: tall and dark in the shadows. He’s big, and I understand why people call him a monster, but he isn’t. Not really. Not to me. Perhaps he shouldn’t be seen as a monster to anyone, but death changes people. Pain changes people.

There’s only so much one man can be expected to deal with alone before his heart breaks and cracks.

There’s only so much.

I should go back to Mrs. Paughts and find out what the staff is going to do to defend the mansion. If men from the village are coming, they’re going to try to destroy it. They’re going to try to destroy everything. They’ll damage the house and they won’t care who’s inside of it.

Their argument might be with Farwol, but their hate consumes them. They won’t care that innocent workers are hurt. They won’t care that I am hurt. They won’t care about anything but revenge.

“I don’t want to leave you.”

“Do it,” he growls at me, turning to stare at me with those dark, dark eyes.

“You can’t just demand that I obey you at all times,” I tell him. “I might be your prisoner, but I am more than that.”

“You are not. You are nothing else to me.”

It's a lie, but I'll let him have it. I know I'm special to Farwol. I know I'm different. It's obvious in the way he treats me, in the way he protects me. He cares about me deeply. He just doesn't know what to do with those feelings because he's never experienced them before.

He doesn't know how to put into words that I'm not the same as all the other people in the world.

I want to reach for him, to take his hand and promise it's going to be okay, but before I can, the banging starts, and the mansion begins to shake.

Chapter 11

The villagers are determined to break into the mansion. The solid wooden doors won't hold them out for long. Not when they're yelling for Forwal. Not when they're demanding his head.

"What did you ever do to them?" I ask, crossing to the dungeon window to peek out the front of the mansion. "You've never done them wrong. They have no reason to hate you."

I'm not scared of the villagers. Perhaps I should be. Forwal probably has some sort of escape plan or attack protocol in place. Mrs. Paughts was anxious for me to find him, but she didn't seem scared or afraid. She just seemed a little bit nervous.

It's not fair that these men should come here now to attack him. They have no business doing so. They have no business coming for the man I love.

This is our home.

I'm more angry than I am scared.

Fuck these men for coming here, for coming in the middle of the day, for thinking they can just attack and get away with it.

I look outside in time to see several men walking down the path to the house. There are already three men at the door, hitting it with their fists. They'll never break in that way, but then, if they get enough people, maybe they'll figure out a way.

Forwal looks sad, but resigned to his fate. He looks like he knows they've been planning this, like he expected to go out this way.

And then I realize he's not going to save us.

He's not going to fight them.

His face is shrouded in sadness, and he's not going to rescue us.

Not this time.

"You can't just give up," I say, looking from him to the window and back again. "You just can't. You have to do something. Don't you have a plan? Do you have weapons? What do we do, Forwal?"

"The world is not as simple as you seem to think it is."

"At least I'm trying!" I hit the glass window. It wobbles, but doesn't shatter. It should. It should shatter and break and fall into a million pieces because that's what I feel like my heart is doing right now.

"You should go," he says. "They won't hurt you. You're one of them."

"I will never go back to them."

Forwal stares at the wall, but something tells me he's not thinking of the stone that lines the sides of the room. No, he's somewhere else, somewhere in his head. He's somewhere I'm never going to get to be and he's thinking about something I'll never get to understand.

He's not who I thought he was the day he took me. There's something dark and dangerous about him, something deadly, but there's also something broken.

He is damaged, perhaps beyond repair.

"What should we do?" There are more people coming out. I can see at least 15 men, including one I know very well. "My father is here," I point to the window. The familiar face isn't a welcome one. I can't explain why seeing him makes me feel uncomfortable. I should miss my father. I should pine for him, but I don't.

"You need to leave," Forwal repeats. "But do not go back to your father's home."

"Why not?"

He's silent.

"Tell me."

Still, Forwal doesn't speak. He doesn't move. He just watches me, waiting. When he came for me, I was terrified, horrified. When I crawled under the bed to hide, I was so scared I thought my world was ending, but now I know there is more to life than the people who raise you.

"The man my father paid off. What did he see?"

Forwal told me my father had been caught. Someone saw something they weren't supposed to, and my father went to Forwal for a loan. Who had seen him doing something? What had he done that was so terrible?

"Your father's job," Forwal says. "What is it?"

The sound of yelling from outside fades as I concentrate on what Forwal is asking me. It's a strange question and I'm not sure why he's bringing this up now. Why would he care what my father's position in the village might be? What does that have to do with the men trying to break into the building?

I'm sure the employees have barred the front door. The staff is likely arming themselves, ready to go to fight for Forwal. They all seem to like him. At the very least, they respect him.

"He's a butcher."

"A good one, I'm told."

"The best in the village. No one can compete with his hams."

Forwal nods and turns, leaning back against the wall. He crosses his ankles. This gives him a casual, relaxed look. He doesn't seem nervous or bothered by these questions or by my answers. Then again, I suspect he already knows what my answers are going to be before I offer them, so I'm not sure why he's even going through the trouble of asking me.

Maybe he just wants to see if I'll lie.

Forwal is clever, though, and he's sneaky. He's always two steps ahead of other people. Perhaps he's trying to get me to truly think about my childhood, about what I thought I knew, but he doesn't realize that I don't want to.

Or he simply doesn't care.

"And your father spends quite a bit of time at his shop, doesn't he?"

"You know he does."

"And he doesn't have any other employees."

This one isn't a question.

"No, he doesn't. Johnny-boy worked there for a bit, but he left to go live with his aunt."

"And who told you that?"

"Johnny-boy told my father the day he quit, and my father told me."

"There is no aunt," Forwal says. "Johnny-boy is dead, and your father is the one who killed him."

I'm silent for a minute because I can't quite believe what he's suggesting, what he's saying. This can't be true. It simply cannot be true. My father would never do this to me. He would never hurt anyone, much less his favorite employee.

"No," I shake my head, finally speaking. "This is a mistake."

"It's not a mistake," Forwal says. He's silent, still. He seems much too calm for this news he's delivering, and I instantly wonder what else he's going to tell me tonight.

"My father doesn't hurt people."

"On the contrary, my love," Forwal's eyes are heavy as he lowers his voice and tells me the words I never thought I'd hear. "Your father is very, very good at hurting people, and he's gotten into

trouble for it before.”

I let the words sink in.

I let them roll over me in a wave, and even though I don't want to accept this, the realization that he's being truthful takes me by surprise. Forwal has done many things, but he has never lied to me, and I don't think he would start now.

I feel sick.

I think of my father, of the man who raised me, and I wonder how I never saw this before. The signs were there: the late nights at his shop, the nights he returned home covered in blood that wasn't his, the times he had strange injuries on his body. He always had an excuse.

It was an excitable pig, but it had to be slaughtered.

This one was messier than usual.

I had to work late to finish up a special order.

He always knew just what to say to keep me calm, to keep me complacent. My father is a murderer, and I had no idea.

Forwal did.

“That's why you took me,” I whisper. “You knew.”

“If I hadn't claimed your father's debt when I did, someone else would have claimed it, and trust me when I tell you they wouldn't be half as kind to you as I am.”

“You can't let them take you tonight. You can't let them hurt you.” I shouldn't feel the pull to Forwal that I do. I shouldn't feel comfortable with him, shouldn't feel safe with him. At the end of the day, I should fear the man who stole me from my home. It's unreasonable to believe my captor when he says he was saving me, yet somehow, that's exactly what I'm doing.

I can't stand the thought of him being taken, damaged. I can't handle the idea that he might be hurt by the men from the village.

Before he can do anything, though, Fortune and Gauge burst through the door.

“It's time,” Fortune says.

“They've come,” Gauge adds.

Forwal obviously knows this, but he doesn't panic or react. He just walks to me and kisses me on the forehead.

“You have been perfect,” he whispers. “But you cannot leave now. You had a chance, Evelyn. Remember that.”

Before his words register in my mind, Fortune grabs me and hoists me over his shoulder so I'm hanging upside down. He holds me firmly in place and carries me quickly from the room.

“Stop! Put me down!”

“Can't do that, miss.”

“You have to. Put me down! He needs me!”

“Master needs no one but himself, miss. The sooner you realize that, the better off you'll be.”

Chapter 12

Fortune takes me to the bedroom I share with Forwal, and he deposits me there.

"Please," I whisper. "Don't leave me here."

"Evelyn," he turns to me, using my name for the very first time. "You're good for him, but he is not a good man. Do not make the mistake of thinking that he is."

Then he leaves, locking the door, and I am alone.

I immediately rush to the window and plaster my face to the glass. I can see the villagers outside. I can see them pushing and ramming the door. I can see them trying to break in, and then I see the first one fall.

I look again as another man falls, and then another. It's all happening so fast that I don't realize why they're falling at first until one of them rolls over and I see it.

Arrows.

Someone is shooting arrows at them.

Forwal has come through.

For a man who said he was good for nothing, for a man who said he was useless, Forwal somehow decided to defend his home, to defend his place. He somehow decided that fighting for me was worth it.

He's going to save us.

One by one, the men fall to the ground, and soon only my father is left. Fortune and Gauge, along with a few other men, go out the front door of the mansion and surround him. My father's only weapon is a knife. He holds it in front of him like a shield, like it's going to save him.

He holds it as if it's going to offer him some sort of protection, but there are simply too many of them.

And then he looks up.

Our eyes lock through the glass, and my heart clenches as I see the different emotions there: first hope, then pain, then sadness.

I press my hand to the glass.

I'm sorry, my father mouths.

I don't even have time to respond before an arrow hits him, too, and he falls. It seems to take hours, days, weeks for his body to hit the ground, and when it does, the entire world goes silent.

My father, the murderer, is dead.

My father is gone.

My father, the man who raised me, the man who taught me to believe, is no more.

A single tear falls down my cheek, and then I hear the door to the bedroom open behind me.

"I'm sorry you had to see this," he says. "I gave you a chance to leave."

"Why?" I don't turn around. "Why did you offer me that? You stole me away, or have you forgotten? You took me. You took me, and then you wanted to throw me back to those same men." I turn around, and I hate that Forwal is seeing me cry. "Did you decide you no longer wanted me?"

He crosses the room quickly, grabs my hair, and pulls my head back sharply.

"Don't ever think that," he says firmly. "Never, ever think that."

"What am I supposed to think?" I spit at him. "You were going to give me away."

"I was giving you a choice."

"Why?"

“Because I love you,” he growls the words, and his mouth crashes fiercely onto mine. There is nothing sweet or romantic about the way he’s kissing me now. No, now he’s kissing me with need, with desire. He’s kissing me because he has to.

He’s kissing me because he can’t get enough of me.

“I love you, too,” I whisper. Then I add, “Fortune said you did not love me.”

“Fortune is a fool.”

“He’s been with you a long time.”

“And you will be with me longer,” Forwal says. “I want you to remember, Evelyn. I want you to remember that I gave you a chance to leave, and you chose to stay. You chose me.”

I reach for his face and touch his cheek softly, gently. “When it comes to you, I never had a choice.”

He swept me away, and he showed me that he is more than a monster. He is more than a recluse. He is more.

He lifts me up and carries me to the bed. He lays me down, and then he covers me with kisses. Slowly, tenderly, he undresses me one piece of clothing at a time. He drops each piece on the floor, and once I am naked, he just looks at me.

“I have cared for women before,” he says. “But I have never loved before, Evelyn. It is only you. It has only ever been you, and it will only ever be you. For as long as I can remember, I have been in the darkness, but you are my rose. You are my light. You are my heart.”

“Kiss me again,” I whisper, and he does.

He kisses me over and over until everything else fades away. He kisses me until I’m not thinking of my past, or how I came to live here, or what will happen to me in the future. He kisses me until all I can think about is the way he makes me feel, the way he looks at me like I’m important, the way he fought for our freedom from the villagers.

He kisses me, and nothing else matters.

Epilogue

It's not every day you meet a monster, but sometimes you do.

Sometimes you meet someone who seems so fierce, and so scary, and so damn terrifying that you don't know what to do.

Sometimes you meet someone and everything changes.

Forwal was the monster, but he wasn't what I thought.

He wasn't what anyone thought.

He took me, and I thought he was stealing me away. What I didn't know was that he was rescuing me, saving me. He was taking me away from a dark future where I might not survive much longer. He was saving me from a man who was truly, honestly a monster.

He rescued me, but there's something more.

I rescued him, too.

Before Forwal took me, before he captured my body and stole my heart, he was lonely: a lost soul. I think because so many people saw him as a monster, as a demon, that he started to see himself that way, too.

I don't think he considered he might be more than that. He didn't think anyone could ever learn to love him, to care for him, to cherish him. People only ever saw him as a beast, and then he found me.

And we saved each other.

That's the beauty of love.

It doesn't matter if you're broken. It doesn't matter if you're damaged. It doesn't matter if you're struggling or hurting or alone. When you find that person, the person you're meant to be with, they see you for who you are, for who you can be, for who you're supposed to be.

They see your soul, and they love you in spite of it.

They see you.

Each day with Forwal is like a new beginning: a new chance to show the world what I'm made of.

And you know what?

I'm tougher than I look.

He's shown me that, and he's showered me with love, and he's given me the world.

And I'm giving it right back.

Now and forever.

THE END

About the Author

Sophie Stern writes paranormal romance about dragons, bears, wolves, and princesses. Her work ranges from adult fairytales to cowboy adventures to dragon shifters who live on their own private island. Visit her at www.sexysophiestern.com to learn more.

***Make sure you [join my mailing list](#) to receive updates on release days, receive freebie books,
and learn all about what I've been up to!***

Alien Dragon

I'm on the last ship out.

I don't think I'm going to make it, but I do. Earth is dying and there's only one way I can possibly survive: fight for a spot on the dragon planet of Taneyemm.

They don't want humans there.

They don't like us.

They don't know us.

But when I step foot on the ship bound for Taneyemm, I know it's my last hope. I'll do anything I have to survive.

I'll do whatever it takes.

When I finally reach my destination and I see the alien dragons for the first time, I realize I'm in way over my head.

And I don't know if my heart is ready for this.

Want to read more? Get your copy on [Amazon](#) or keep reading for a sneak peek!

Chapter 1

What's that old Earth saying?

Karma's a bitch?

Well, I must have done something super fucked up in a former life because right now sucks.

The worst part is that there's nothing I can do about it.

As I make my way slowly through the crowds of people to the herbalist's shop, I search my brain for one more idea, one more method I could employ to make my life just a little bit better. I just need one more way to try to make my dad more comfortable. I just need one more way to give him a little bit of hope before everything vanishes.

My home planet is dying. The grass is gone and the air is thick. It's always hard to breathe. Always. When I was a child, we had green, rich grass. That was before the wars. That was long ago. Now things are damaged and it's all I can do to get through the day.

I just need to make it through each day.

My world has always been broken. There are legends of times past when humans were happy, but to me, those stories are just myths. They're happy bedtime stories to help children fall asleep, but they don't fix the reality I live in.

Tonight I have to hurry home to my father, but my mind is focused on the pain, the exhaustion. No matter how hard I fight, the world keeps closing in on me, on all of us. Will there ever come a day when the grass turns green again? Will there ever be a time when the air is clean?

A woman bumps me and I glare at her, tired and angry. I'm frustrated. I'm worn out. I have to fight through a crowd of sick and dying people to get herbs for my father who is also sick and dying. We all just want to survive another day, but the grim reality is that it probably won't happen. We're all running on borrowed time and it's only a matter of when it runs out.

My father is very sick. He's in constant pain, but when he finally passes, I don't know what I'm going to do. He's the only one I have. He's the only one who cares about me.

The herbalist gives me the jar and I throw my coins at him before leaving. It's a long walk home and it's already dark. We're not supposed to be outside at night, but I don't have much of a choice. It's a three mile walk back to our hut and if I don't make it, my father's pain will be so strong he'll pass out.

Things weren't always so bad. Despite the world dying, falling apart, resting in ruins, my father and I were happy once, at least a little. He wasn't always sick. When I was a girl, he would tell me stories of times when Earth was full and lively and fun. He used to make me laugh. We'd make plans for the future that always included escaping Earth, but we never had the money.

And then he got sick.

It's not that there weren't options. There were. For nearly 10 years, there were ships bringing people to other planets. Oh, you had to see your soul and maybe a few body parts to afford passage, but there were ways to escape.

Not anymore.

The last ship sailed this morning for Taneyemm, and I wasn't on it. I couldn't afford what they were asking. The price for simply getting on the ship is more money than I've seen in my lifetime.

And the ticket price didn't even guarantee you'd get to stay on the planet.

Interplanetary relations are a tricky thing. Not every planet wants humans, even rich ones. Some planets *super* want humans, or so I've heard. It really just depends on where you go, and what you

can afford, and which ship you can get on.

The rich people evacuated Earth first, heading to planets full of humans. They basically had their choice of planets to run to. The Martians were especially friendly toward Earthlings and took in more refugees than any other planet. Most of the others were a bit more standoffish, though.

Most of the others didn't quite know what to do with us.

Taneyemm is one of the worst, but I'd still go there in a heartbeat if it meant getting off Earth. Even if the world doesn't implode like some predict it will, we're all going to starve to death pretty soon. There's no food left.

Reslenoau delivered food for years to Earth, but even with Earthlings fleeing to other planets, there was never enough. Soon they couldn't keep up with the demand and they quit bringing food altogether.

I try not to think about that.

Right now I have to get home. I move as quickly as my feet will carry me. My leather slippers are old and worn and they don't do much to protect my feet. No, my skin won't be torn up from the rocky terrain, but I feel every rock pressing against the soles of my feet.

I feel every sting.

It's well past midnight when I arrive home and slip inside the tiny hut I share with my father. We built it years ago, long after Mama died, and it's tiny, but it keeps us warm. It keeps us dry.

"Father," I say, kneeling beside his bed. It's only a pallet on top of some crates, but for the most part, it's fine. His poor body is wracked with fatigue, pain, and sickness. I know sometimes he wishes it would just be over. He's been sick for a long time and unfortunately, there's nothing we can do.

There was a doctor in our town, but he left long ago.

I reach for my father, ready to wake him and give him his herbs, but when I touch him, his body is cold and stiff. He rolls as I touch him and I see that I'm too late.

I took too long and he's gone.

He's dead.

My father is gone.

For a long time, I just sit next to his bed. I don't react. I don't cry. I don't do anything. I can't. He was all I had left in the world and he's gone. He's gone.

When the tears finally come, the sobs are loud and painful. I cry until I have nothing left, and then I sit there. If only our lives had gone differently. If only he'd been able to make it on a ship. Any ship. Anywhere.

Maybe he would have had a chance.

I don't know much about medical care on other planets, but I know anything would have been better than this. The pain of losing him is only soothed by the realization that he's no longer hurting. For months, my father has struggled with even the most basic tasks. The last few weeks have been the hardest.

We both knew there wasn't much time left.

And now?

Now I'm stuck on a dying planet with no hope for a future. What am I supposed to do? Wait around until I die, too?

"Fuck you, death," I whisper, and grab my father's hand one last time. I hold it for a moment, then kiss him on the forehead. "Goodbye, Father," I murmur, and smooth back his hair. He's covered with a soft quilt and I pull it over his head before I stand.

There's nothing left for me here.

It's the middle of the night, but I don't care. I ignore the fears that rush through me as I step back outside. There are wild creatures roaming about. They're just as hungry as me, but they're more vicious.

It's not like I have anything left to live for, so I just start running.

After about ten minutes, I slow down to a walk. My crying has stopped, but I still feel like I'm dreaming. I'm living this nightmare that never ends, reminding me once again that not all dreams are good. I know this better than most Earthlings.

That's why I hate when people make those weird wishes about their dreams coming true. Who really wants that? Some dreams are nightmares. Even if you think you know what you're asking for, you don't. Not always. Not even usually.

My running has brought me close to town, near to where I brought the herbs. I haven't seen any animals yet, which is unusual. Usually there are at least a few stray dogs running around. Sometimes there are even cats. Despite my tears, I manage to calm down long enough to wonder where the animals have gone.

Why aren't there any around?

Instead of heading to the city center, I veer around the outside of the village. I notice the lights coming from just beyond the edges of the dilapidated buildings.

There used to be a school and some other things in this area. Maybe even a government office. I'm not sure. Now it's just used as a landing area when aliens come to Earth. Still, we aren't getting any of those again, so why is it lit? There shouldn't be any lights over here.

There shouldn't be any people.

Curiosity starts to overtake my emotions. Instead of feeling extreme pain my heart, I'm feeling something else. I'm calming down and now, instead of heading for the village, I'm walking toward the light. I duck under the barbed wire fence that goes around the old school building. It's falling down and wouldn't keep a mouse out, let alone an intruder.

Around the back of the building, I have a clear view of a large, hovering spaceship. Lights are shining all around it, although less than there usually are.

What the hell?

Slowly, cautiously, I approach the ship. Why is it here? Is this the Taneyemm ship? Surely it can't be. I know all about that ship and I know that more than anything else, the Taneyemm ship was supposed to leave yesterday. We all thought it did, so why is it here? All thoughts of my father vanish as I wonder – stupidly, perhaps – whether there's any chance I could get on board.

If I stay on Earth, I'll wander around until I kill myself or starve to death. There is no one here to look after me, no one here to care for me. There's no one here to make sure I'm eating or drinking water or staying alive. Everyone is so busy looking after their own that the best damn thing I can do for my village is to die.

There are people moving between the ship and the ground, loading large boxes and cargo. I peek from around a boulder, my eyes prying into the darkness. There are 10 or 15 humans walking around. One has a clipboard and appears to be checking items off a list as the others move around, taking and giving orders.

I'm about 30 yards from the entrance to the ship. Right now, there's no chance I'd be able to sneak onboard undetected. Without a plan, without money, without hope, how am I going to get on?

Earth is dying and I don't want to die with it. My father is dead. Gone. Even if I'd been willing to leave him before, there was no chance we could afford it, but now? Now I'm a desperate woman and freedom is within my grasp.

I watch for about half an hour. Suddenly, the man with the clipboard says something in a language I don't understand, and most of the group heads on board. Two of the men don't. They walk over to where I'm standing, and I scurry back behind the boulder. They stand on the other side, facing the ship, and start speaking.

This time, I can understand them. I think they're eating something or smoking something because a sweet scent wafts in the air, but I don't recognize it.

"I'll be damn glad to leave this planet," one man says. The other one makes a noise that sounds like agreement. "Two weeks is long enough. I can't believe Hal shorted us a girl."

"Fucking Hal," the other man agrees, and my ears perk up. They're missing a girl?

"I mean, I know it's sad and all. Don't get me wrong, but uh, in case she didn't notice, her planet is sort of trash."

"What did Hal say the problem was?"

"She decided to stay. Didn't want to leave her family. Now we're one short and we were already running behind. He needs another girl, a young one, within the next four hours or that signing bonus he promised? Gone."

The second man makes another noise and I get the distinct impression he's a man of few words. What did he say, though? They need a girl. I glance down at myself, realizing I'm nothing to look at. My faded leather slippers are worn and dirty. My dress is really just a plain brown shift that's quite ordinary and nothing special, but my father always told me that my eyes are nice. Maybe they'll think the same thing.

Maybe I could be the girl they need.

I don't know what it is they need females for and to be honest, I don't care. If it means getting off Earth, isn't that enough?

"We need to get back before Jenika gives us shit," the first man says again, and I hear a shuffling sound. This is it, I realize. It's now or never. I need to speak up, stand up, or my chance will be lost.

"Wait!" I cry out, more softly than I had intended to. Still, they hear me, and they both turn around as I run over. One of them drops whatever he had been smoking. Some sort of pipe. It clatters on the cracked pavement, but they both ignore the sound and stare at me as I scurry over.

The men are both taller than any humans I've ever seen. I'd guess they're at least six feet tall, maybe taller. I know humans used to be taller, but these days? These days I'm considered a giant at five-and-a-half feet. Their eyes are bright and sparkly, even in the dim lighting that surrounds the ship. I wonder where they're from. Are they from Taneyemm or somewhere else? Are they natives or were they recruited to come here?

I can't help but feeling very, very small as I approach the men. I come to a quick stop in front of them, and they both just stare, open-mouthed at me.

What a sight I must be: messy, ragged hair and a tear-streaked face.

"I heard you need a girl," I say, and they both exchange looks. After a long moment, the taller man speaks.

"Well, Tank, looks like you'll be getting that bonus, after all."

Chapter 2

The men circle around me like vultures, looking at my body and speaking in a language I don't understand. The shorter man, Tank, touches my hair, and I try not to flinch.

"Don't worry," he says gruffly to me in my own language. "I'm not going to hurt you, darling." I just nod. All I can do is nod. I ball my hands into fists and then release them over and over again as they speak. Finally, the taller man stands in front of me and touches my chin, softly raising my gaze to him.

"You understand what you're getting into, honey?"

"I understand."

"You won't be coming back to Earth. You know that, right?"

"It doesn't matter," I manage to get out. "There's nothing left for me here."

The man nods slowly, watching my eyes. Is he trying to figure out if I'm lying? I don't know. All I know is that he's surprisingly handsome, he smells great, and his skin is soft against mine. If this were any other situation, I'd be trying to figure out how to get him to take my mind off things.

Tank touches my arm and I turn to him.

"The Taneyemms don't like humans much, darling."

At that, I gulp. That's something I know. I've heard rumors about it. People say the inhabitants of Taneyemm only take in humans because it's cheap labor. We're small, weak, and tiny. No one knows what exactly humans who go to Taneyemm do for the planet, but I'm going to guess that I won't be cleaning mirrors or scrubbing floors.

"I understand," I say. "I accept my fate."

The taller man puts his face in his palm and shakes his head.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" He asks, but I don't answer him. I have a feeling he doesn't expect an answer. The truth is that there's a lot wrong with me. I'm not exactly normal or perfect or special. I might have nice eyes, but I'm very ordinary in every other aspect. I don't play an instrument or have a special talent. I'm not particularly smart or educated. My adult life has been spent taking care of one sick parent and then another, so when he asks what the fuck is wrong with me?

Everything.

"What my companion means, darling," Tank shoots the other man a dark look. "Is that there's no coming back. Ever. If you get there and they don't want you, you'll be shipped off to another planet or killed. There are no return voyages to Earth. This is the last one. Doesn't that scare you?"

My eyes blink several times.

I take a deep breath.

This is my only shot at leaving. It's the only chance I'll ever have. If I stay, I'll be dead within a week or two. If I actually want to live – and a deep, secret part of me does – then I need to convince this man Tank that I'm worth something.

I need to convince him that I won't be trouble, that I'll help him qualify for this bonus he wants so badly.

"Tank, sir, I appreciate your concern and I understand what you're saying, but sir? I have nothing left here. My father died not an hour ago and I have no one else. I have no money, no hope, no future, no friends. I'm an orphan without parents, without a partner, without a husband. I have no children. If you don't take me, I'll be sitting around waiting to die because I have nothing left to live for."

Something passes over his gaze.

Sadness, I think.

Maybe it's pity.

Either way, Tank doesn't speak again and he nods to his friend.

"Elf, come on."

"Elf?" I turn. "Your name is Elf?" I might live in a dirt hut, but even I know the stories about elves from days past.

"Yes," he says, pleasantly surprised I commented on his name. He smiles. "It's my Earth name. Elf. You know, little tiny elves?" He lowers his hand and bounces it, as if showing me the small size of a tiny imaginary elf.

"But you aren't tiny," I point out the obvious, but Elf just chuckles.

"Oh, honey," he kisses my forehead. "That's the point." He turns back to Tank. "This one's going to be fun."

The men stand on either side of me and lead me toward the ship. This is it, I realize. It's happening. Glancing back behind me, I mentally wave goodbye to the boulders, the dying trees, the dust, the dirt. I can't see the town from here anymore. I can't see anything. Night has fallen on Earth and day will not be coming.

"Come on, darling," Tank whispers. His touch is gentle as he places his hand on my lower back and pushes me forward. He means to guide me, not seduce me, and I can tell the difference. "You said it yourself. There's nothing here for you anymore."

One deep breath.

I take one deep and keep moving forward. We approach the plank that rises up into the ship and carefully walk up it. It's wide enough for all of us to move side-by-side, so we make our way up the incline.

Soon we're inside the Taneyemm ship.

I'm actually, really, truly inside a Taneyemm ship.

I blink several times to get used to how bright it is. Everything is painfully light. Tank grabs a pair of dark glasses from the wall. I notice there are dozens of pairs all hanging by the entrance. He places them on my head.

"This will help you get used to the light," he says. "Taneyemm is much brighter than Earth. By the time we get there, you'll be used to the brightness and the world won't seem so harsh."

"Thank you, Mr. Tank." I try to be polite. These men control my fate and the truth is, even if the planet I'm going to completely sucks, it can't be worse than Earth. I won't forget that they didn't have to take me, but they did. This is much better than having to sneak onto the ship, than having to hide around in the cargo hold and scavenge for food.

Not that I wouldn't do it, but this is nicer.

Definitely nicer.

Elf and Tank lead me down a brightly lit corridor. There are doors on either side with various labels and signs. Some of the rooms have open windows and I try to discreetly peer in, but it's still hard to see, even with the glasses on.

"Just keep moving forward," Elf says gruffly, and I obey. My feet move on their own. As we make our way down the hall, I can't help but feel dirty and grungy. Elf and Tank are both tall and tan, but their clothes are pristine and white. My own garments are faded and worn. I'm worried that if I touch anything, I'll darken it and damage it. My skin is physically dirty. I can't remember the last time I had a bath or a hot shower.

Maybe they'll give me something new to wear. Surely they won't let me make the entire journey wearing only a shift.

Will they?

If they want me to stay clean, to keep my hands to myself, they'll have to give me something to wear. They'll just have to.

"Mr. Tank," I say, my throat suddenly dry. As if sensing my sudden panic, both men stop and turn to me.

"What is it, human?" Tank's voice is straightforward, but gentle.

"How long is the journey to Taneyemm?"

If it's more than a few weeks, I'll ask for clothes. I'll have to figure out how to get the courage, but I'll do it. I might be able to manage keeping my hands to myself for a few weeks, but more than that and I'll need something to change into.

Surely they'll be able to provide that for me.

"Four Earth years."

Four.

Earth.

Years.

He's got to be kidding. I knew that the journey was long, but the farthest I've ever been was a day's walk. Years? He's talking about years?

So much can change in a day.

How much will change in four years?

I'm in a completely different situation than I was hours ago, let alone a day ago. I almost missed this journey by a single day. What the hell am I going to do on a ship for four years?

Play cards?

Maybe they'll freeze us, I realize suddenly. I've heard about that. Rumors, of course, but I've heard of it. Before the wars, before the famines, before the plagues, I loved to read. I read a lot about space travel, but suddenly, that time seems very long ago.

We reach the end of a hall and turn, only instead of another hallway, we're in an open room now. There are several chairs in a semi-circle in front of a panel of knobs and buttons and computers. Beyond that, there's glass overlooking my planet.

Overlooking my town.

Arcadia was never much to look at, but it was home. Before I start to cry as I take one last, wistful look at my planet, I try to look around the unusual room. Judging from how official everything looks, I would guess this is where the magic happens.

Each chair on the far side of the room has a person in it. Each person is wearing a uniform that is different from Tank and Elf's. These are more official-looking. They're black with red fire streaks on the shirts and bright red buttons that go down the front.

All eyes turn as we enter and a tall man, even taller than Elf, walks over to us. He eyes me up and down, then turns to Elf.

He begins speaking in a language I don't understand.

I wish I did.

Elf responds quickly, waving at me and gesturing wildly. I suppose this is the part of the story where he's explaining that he found me and I'm going to be Hal's replacement girl, whatever the fuck that means. I stare at the captain, but try to look demure about it. I don't think I'm pulling it off. I should probably be staring at my hands or feet, looking shyly away, but that's not my style.

Never has been.

After a few minutes, the captain makes an exasperated sound and turns to me. This time he speaks English.

“Do not give me trouble,” he says. Then he storms out of the room.

“That went well,” Tank mumbles under his breath, and the men lead me back out.

“Where are we going now?” I ask. Elf doesn’t even look at me. He just grumbles something and we keep walking. Maybe I should just stay silent. I need to make myself as invisible as possible.

Not an easy task, I think dryly, looking at my dirty body.

Instead of talking, I use this time to look around the ship, but we’re moving so quickly that I’m not really sure where we’re at. We go up one staircase and down another, down one hall, around a bend, then more halls.

By the time we stop at a small room, I’m completely turned around and completely exhausted.

They lead me inside and there’s a surprisingly short, blonde-haired man inside. He looks human. I can’t quite shake the idea that Elf, Tank, and the captain aren’t. I feel like they’re Taneyemms, even though they haven’t told me they are.

“Hal,” Elf says, and I know this is the man who “needed the girls.” “We have a girl for you.”

To my surprise, Hal hops up and hugs Elf. He wraps his arms around the man and starts jumping up and down.

“I knew you could do it!” He says. “I knew you could do it!”

Elf gingerly peels Hal away, the same way he would a little child.

“There’s a complication,” Elf says, looking from me and back to Hal. Hal nods.

“What is it? I can tell she’s a bit...worn...but that shouldn’t pose much of a problem on its own. She’s not the worst we’ve seen.”

I’m not sure if this is an insult or a compliment.

“The others have already been frozen,” Tank says, and Elf nods. He looks at me with sympathy.

“She’ll have to stay awake during the trip. There’s no more neila left to freeze her.” Elf sounds truly remorseful and I wonder exactly what’s going to happen to me on a ship full of super sexy men.

“How can there not be any left? Didn’t you know we might find another girl?” Hal’s voice rises a little, and his face starts to look a little red.

“We didn’t think we’d be able to.”

“And?” Hal seems like he’s waiting for something, and Elf sighs.

“And Dar asked if we’d use the rest to freeze him. You know how he gets bored on these trips.” Elf and Tank both look sympathetically at me once more, as if I’m going to somehow get bored on a spaceship.

As if.

“Is there a room for her?” Hal doesn’t seem fazed by this turn of events, but I am. I’ll be awake on this ship for four years. For four years, the other girls will be asleep, but I won’t.

I’ll be awake.

What the hell am I going to do on a spaceship?

Still, I suppose I can’t complain. They brought me here and saved me from certain death, so I need to be grateful. I’ll smile and nod and do whatever they say because if I do, I get to stay alive, and that’s the real goal, right?

“We have a room and rations,” Elf confirms. He lowers his voice and adds, “Keilla’s.”

“I’m sorry for your loss,” Hal says, but Elf just grunts. I wonder who Keilla was or who she was to Elf. My heart hurts a little as I wonder what pain he might be feeling. I still haven’t let my father’s

death sink in and I'm basically running on autopilot at this point. At the implication of death, my heart threatens to crack a little bit more, but I suck down the pain.

When I'm alone, I can cry.

When I'm alone, I can mourn my father.

Elf turns back to me and places a large, heavy hand on my shoulder.

"Girl, you'll be fine," he says. "Listen to Hal. Do what he says. You'll be fine."

"Thank you," I nod. I know he must have risked his neck for me in there with the captain, and I appreciate it. Spontaneously, I wrap my arms around him in a hug, and he tenses for a moment. Then he relaxes his body and hugs me back.

"Take care of yourself," he says quietly, then he leaves.

"No hug for me, thanks," Tank says with a smile. He nods at me, then follows Elf out of the room. When they're gone, I turn back to Hal.

"What happens now?" I ask.

"Now?" He says. "Now I make you Taneyemm material."

He grins, and I get the feeling that I'm not going to like how Hal prepares me for my new life.

I'm not going to like it at all.

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The Saucy Devil

Julianne doesn't want to get married.

She certainly doesn't want to marry someone as terrible as Vince Fiddick. The other villagers might believe that his previous wives went missing, but Julianne knows the truth. Fearing for her life, she seeks refuge on the nearest pirate ship: The Dark Lovely.

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When his life is threatened, however, Julianne has to make a choice.

Will she play it safe?

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Prologue

“I suppose she’ll do,” Vince Fiddick hissed the words. He looked at Julianne like she was a tolerable prize. He may have wanted Annabelle Portwood, but he would settle for her. Oh, Julianne knew she wasn’t the man’s first choice, but he would take what he could get.

“Oh, how wonderful. Lovely news, isn’t it?” Julianne’s father rubbed his hands together, no doubt thinking of the betrothal fee Vince would be paying for the *honor* of wedding her.

“No,” Julianne shook her head. She could not do it. She would not consent to marrying the man her parents had chosen for her. She would be his fourth wife, and Julianne knew she would fare no differently than they had.

“Julianne,” Margaret Rye glared at her daughter. Julianne knew the look well. She had always been a disappointment to her parents. Why should things be any different now? Margaret and William Rye wanted their daughter to wed this man, who was nearly twice Julianne’s age, and they cared naught for their daughter’s opinion on the matter.

Julianne looked at her mother blankly, waiting for her to say something else, but Margaret simply stared at her.

“Don’t worry, darling,” Vince said, turning his attention to Julianne. “It’s natural to be nervous before your wedding, but you have nothing to be concerned about. You’ll see.” He shook hands with Julianne’s father, and then the two men retreated to William’s study to make the necessary arrangements for the ceremony.

Julianne sat in silence with her mother while the men were gone. The sitting room felt stuffy and small. Suddenly, the entire room felt hot. Julianne felt as if her entire life was being decided for her and she had no say in the matter. She should be used to the feeling by now, but somehow, this was different.

This was her *entire* life.

This was her whole future.

“I won’t marry him,” she said finally.

“You don’t have a choice. You were raised for this, bred for this.” Margaret did not meet her daughter’s eyes. Julianne stared at her mother, openly gawking.

“This is marriage,” she said. “Marriage should be to someone you love, to someone you can’t stand being apart from. It shouldn’t be some financial transaction.”

“You know nothing of the world,” Margaret said, sipping a cup of tea. Her face was wrinkled and she had dark circles under her eyes. Julianne knew her mother was getting older, and restless. While Julianne suspected her mother was battling health issues, Margaret had too much pride to ever admit this to her daughter.

“I know what the world should be,” Julianne told her mother, suddenly feeling brave. “And I know this is not what it should be.”

“If only you were more like your brother,” Margaret shook her head. Julianne bit back a cough. Oh, if only her parents knew what her sweet brother was up to. They believed he had gone off to Ellensworth to work as an apprentice. They had no idea where he really was. They had no clue the things her brother did.

Julianne knew better than to argue with her mother, though. Once Margaret set her mind to something, nothing would sway her opinion.

After what felt like hours, her father and Vince Fiddick emerged from the study.

“The wedding will take place on Saturday,” William announced to the women in the sitting room.

“But that’s in two days!” Julianne jumped to her feet. “That’s—” She stopped. Her parents had made up their minds. There would be no talking them out of this. If she protested the marriage, they would simply lock her in her bedroom until the time of the ceremony, and she couldn’t have that.

No, if Julianne wanted to be able to have any chance to escape, she would have to play her cards close to her chest. She would have to appear to be compliant. She would have to be clever because there was no doubt in her mind Vince Fiddick had murdered his other wives. She would *not* end up like them.

“That’s not nearly enough time to plan a wedding,” she said instead. “Why, how can I have a proper gown made?”

“Darling,” Vince Fiddick walked across the room to Julianne. He reached for her. Though it sickened her to have him touch her, she swallowed hard and allowed his clammy palms to squeeze her hands. “Believe me when I say you will have the most perfect wedding you can imagine.”

“Thank you,” Julianne said. She had nothing else to say to the man. She hated him, despised him. He was not a man she would ever choose to associate with, let alone marry, but she had to be careful. If he suspected her of trying to escape before the ceremony, he would do anything in his power to keep her.

Even if it meant killing her.

“Such lovely news,” Margaret said, clasping her hands together. “And what a beautiful pairing.” She looked at Julianne and Vince, and for a brief second, Julianne thought her mother looked truly happy.

Then she remembered that her mother didn’t have a soul. Any emotion she displayed, aside from anger, was a carefully calculated appearance designed for maximum manipulation.

But during her childhood, Julianne hadn’t simply learned how to run a house or how to sew. No, Julianne had learned more than

that. She had learned how her mother worked, how Margaret used emotional manipulation to get what she wanted.

Julianne realized that if she wanted to escape this marriage, she would have to act quickly. Once she was alone in Vince's house, she would never be allowed to leave. She would be locked away: another prize he had won.

But there was something Julianne's parents didn't know, something Vince Fiddick didn't know. There was something none of them knew, and it would be her saving grace.

Julianne's twin brother wasn't in Ellensworth.

He wasn't an apprentice.

He was a pirate, and *The Dark Lovely* was due to make port tomorrow.

Julianne would have to act quickly, and she would have to catch her brother alone, but she knew one thing was for certain.

She would not marry Vince Fiddick.

Julianne Rye was going to get on the pirate ship with her brother, and she was going to sail away.

She was going to escape.

She was going to live.

Julianne knew she should be thankful to be alive, but as she stared at the hard tack in front of her *again*, she wondered if it might be better to starve. After all, how much more of this could she take? It had been weeks. When she wasn't busy feeling seasick, she was being feeling hungry. Her stomach emitted a growl, reminding her that for today, it was better to suck it up and eat the food.

"Thanks, Nelson," she told her twin brother. She tried to shoot him a grateful look, but it came out pained instead. Nelson was the one who had sneaked her away the night before her wedding to Vince Fiddick was supposed to take place. He was the one who promised to save her. He was the one who kept her hidden and fed, despite the rocky waters and low food supply.

She didn't know where the ship was headed or what was going to happen when it got there, but they both knew that this was Julianne's only option if she ever wanted to be free.

"You're welcome. I'm sorry it's not more." Nelson shrugged regretfully. Julianne knew that he was cutting his own rations in half in order to keep her hidden and alive. Her twin was nothing if not resourceful. His determination mixed with cleverness was keeping her alive. She wouldn't forget it and she wouldn't ask him for more. Anytime she was tempted to complain about how hungry or bored she was, she considered the position she had put her brother in.

He was a pirate, after all. It wasn't in his nature to be merciful, yet here he was, taking care of his sister when no one else would.

"When's the next port?" Julianne asked.

"Tomorrow. Hold tight until then and I'll try to get you off the ship for a little while, at least." He looked nervous, and she knew he was thinking about what a risk it would be to let her out of the little storage room. Crates and barrels surrounded her day in and day out, but there was comfort in knowing this space was rarely used. Most of the pirates spent their days on the main deck when they could and in the crew's quarters when they couldn't. Even when they needed to access cargo, there were two other rooms they used more frequently than this one.

Julianne had gotten good at being quiet in her tiny space on the ship, but if Nelson allowed her to leave, even for a little bit, she would risk being seen. What would happen to her brother if he was caught?

She nodded and wrapped her blanket tighter around herself, cold from weeks of staying in the stores of the ship. Nelson gripped her shoulder for a moment in a soft sign of compassion, then disappeared around the corner. Julianne heard the door close and the lock click in place. She allowed herself to crumple onto the floor with a sigh.

She was stuck on a ship in the middle of the ocean and she had no idea where they were headed. Rumor had it that Wade Docherty, the captain of the ship, was searching for something. Nelson was tight-lipped about what it was. He always told Julianne he wasn't sure what the pirate captain wanted, but his eyes flicked away when he said it. She had been his sister long enough to know when he was lying, and Nelson was definitely lying about knowing.

Was the hunt that dangerous?

Or was Nelson afraid that Julianne would figure out his secret?

She knew her brother loved being a pirate. He pretended to hate it. He'd whine and complain with the best of them, but he loved it. He loved the thrill, the adventure. He loved the hunt. He loved the fights. Most of all, Julianne knew, Nelson loved the danger.

They had grown up in the upper-class area away from the dirty harbor of Gunthry, but they had always sneaked down to peek at the pirates, even as children.

"That'll be me one day," Nelson whispered, but Julianne always made him promise not to tell their parents. There was no telling what they would do if Nelson proclaimed his loyalty to anyone besides the King, especially a pirate.

She leaned her head against the side of the boat. The wood was hard against her head, but she barely noticed anymore. It had been weeks since she fled from Vince Fiddick and her parents, weeks since she joined the gang of pirates, weeks since she gave up one prison for another.

She knew her parents had been pressured to wed her off. Socially, they needed to climb. Their wealth had dwindled and their bloodline was in trouble, but they could have picked a better man.

Any other man in town, she thought, would have been a better choice than Vince. He was cruel and conniving, but more than that, he was calculating. How long would he parade her around town on his arm before he grew tired of her and locked her away to rot in silence and loneliness? How long would he pretend to love her before he grew tired of the charade?

Julianne worried, sometimes, that her parents had suffered some sort of social ramifications when she vanished. Maybe people would think she had died. When she disappeared, she made sure to tell her best mates she was going for a long walk along the cliffs to clear her mind, to think about how she would be a good wife for Vince.

Her girlfriends had giggled and laughed, but they had all promised not to tell anyone. What about the next day? When Julianne never came home, did they tell her parents what she had said? Did they think she had slipped? Did they suspect she had fallen from the cliffs into the raging waters below?

No matter what fate her pals dreamed up, no matter what the townspeople said, nothing could be as horrible as a marriage to Vince. Nothing in the world, nothing in her dreams, nothing. Not even the stale piece of hard tack she was eating, thought Julianne, and she took another bite.

Wade Docherty was the best captain the high seas had ever seen. At least, that's what he told himself. He had commanded *The Dark Lovely* for nearly 10 years, earning quite a reputation for himself. The Saucy Devil was exactly that: saucy. He was sly and cunning, handsome and clever. When Wade put his mind to something, chances were that he got exactly what he had been hoping for.

And what he had been hoping for, for the last several years, was to find Mad Drake's lost treasure. The treasure had vanished when the evil pirate Drake's ship, *The Cursed Hangman*, went down many years ago during a routine cargo transport. Though hundreds of pirates and sailors had searched for the treasure, none had ever found it or the ship. Some speculated that Mad Drake had simply taken the treasure for himself. Others thought that the treasure had a more mythical fate, that it had somehow been cursed or stolen by ghosts or sea monsters.

Wade didn't buy into that nonsense. He knew it was hiding somewhere, just waiting to be found. The right pirate, he knew, could find that treasure. The right pirate could keep that beautiful bounty for himself.

And then that pirate could use that treasure to retire quietly from a long life of thievery and fighting.

Though the rumors varied from port to port, Wade had been captivated by the stories from the first moment he heard them. His crew advised him to stop his search and insisted that it was futile, but Wade didn't care.

He had to find the treasure, no matter how long it took or how much it cost him. *The Cursed Hangman's* bounty would be his. Of that Wade was sure.

"How long to port, Cap'n?" Nelson asked, silently sidling up to the captain. The boy was quiet as a mouse, and smart. Wade had picked him up in a tiny port town nearly a year ago. While Wade wasn't the kind to take on strays, something about the weariness in Nelson's eyes made him bring the boy aboard.

He hadn't regretted it yet.

No other crewmate worked half as hard or twice as long as Nelson did.

"Dawn, if we're lucky," Wade said, eyeing the vast sea before him. He maintained that they were only stopping for supplies and for the men to have a bit of fun, but Nelson saw through that story. He never called Wade out on it, though. He was much too smart for that.

No, Wade didn't want to stop for supplies and he certainly didn't need to find a woman. Though it had been months since he had found anyone to bed, the treasure kept him focused. It required all of his attention, all of his energy.

And tomorrow, if fate was on his side, Wade would be one step closer to finding his heart's desire.

Julianne shifted in her tiny position behind the stacks of trunks and crates. Nelson didn't have his own room on the ship, of course. Only the most important crew members did. What he *did* have was access to the captain's storage room in the hold, which is where he had placed Julianne for safekeeping.

Though part of her resented the idea that she was a possession that needed to be kept safe, Julianne quickly learned the ins and outs of the entire room. To be fair, there wasn't much to see. There were barrels and crates full of supplies, along with random items that had been pillaged. At the back of the room was a row of heavy trunks. Nelson and Julianne had quickly pushed them out from the wall to make a small clearing. That was where Julianne spent her time hiding. There was only space enough for her to lie down on her side, but if they pushed the trunks out further than that, someone would notice and ask why Nelson was wasting space.

Julianne did not need to be noticed, no matter how uncomfortable she was.

The rest of the room was unimpressive and dull. In addition to supplies, Wade stored many of his treasures and favorite items here. Anything he wanted to keep and hold onto, but didn't quite have room for in his chambers ended up here. There were other places for cargo on the ship, but this was the captain's private bounty room. It was small, but carefully kept.

There were many unusual artifacts and treasures here, but nothing delighted Julianne quite as much as a small gold owl that rested on top of a small table. She spent some time each day touching it and holding it, wondering who had owned the owl before Wade plundered it. Maybe a princess, she dreamed, or a fair maiden from a faraway land. Someone had given that owl to one lucky girl as a gift, Julianne knew, long ago. How wonderful must it be to be loved so deeply that someone gave you gifts just because they wanted to?

At night, Julianne slept on a soft blanket on the hard wooden floor. Though it was nothing like her bed at home, it gave her plenty of time to be thankful for all the pleasures she had enjoyed during her short life. And while Nelson couldn't get away from his duties often to spend a lot of time with her, he managed to come by every day to bring her some food and water. *When* he brought her meal – and it was usually only one per day – would vary. Nelson had to be careful when he sneaked around. If he raised suspicion, he risked Julianne's discovery, and no one wanted to be the lone woman on a ship.

By far the most interesting aspect of life as a stowaway, for Julianne, had been the many times that crew members sneaked down into the hold for some quick fun. Anytime the ship stopped at a port, women were inevitably brought on board to be entertainment for the crew. While most of the men brought their women to the crew's quarters, some wanted more privacy, and would sneak into this store room to play.

Julianne always tried to remain quiet from her hiding spot, but it was hard when she was so desperate to see exactly what was happening. She had been intimate with a man before, long ago, but never with Vince. She wouldn't. He had tried and she had refused,

claiming she wanted to be pure for the wedding.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

Now, being witness to so many indiscretions, Julianne found it almost impossible to keep herself hidden away. Maybe she was wrong in hiding from all the men on the ship. While some of them were crass and unpleasant to look at, some of them weren't. Some of them were handsome and rugged. Some of them were strong and stunning.

During the days when the sailors brought their whores into the storage room to fuck and play, Julianne would silently touch herself behind the trunks, hidden away. She wondered why she herself didn't wander onto one of these shores and begin a life of prostitution herself.

Judging from the moans and screams of everyone involved, it seemed like a quite wonderful line of work.

It seemed like something that made everyone happy.

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Thank you for reading!